

Chapter 2. Doing American History in the Recent Past, 1962-2023

Paul H. Mattingly
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

American history Ph.D. from public state University of Wisconsin at Madison, Paul Mattingly found employment in the College of Education at New York University. He then gained a joint appointment with the history department. In time, he became the director of one of the most pioneering public history programs in the United States. His teaching and research changed in direct and indirect relationships with shifting positions.

This essay analyzes my own trajectory, which links the arc of historical training to its 21st century achievement. It is a personal essay. This history is essential because interdisciplinary work is not formally taught in history departments; it can only be assessed through individual experience. Hence this essay moves through my own experience from a pragmatic specialization to an interdisciplinary standard. The story begins with a short summary of historical studies in the early 20th century and leads by several steps to my own interdisciplinary product. The trajectory differs from person to person but in the main, my experience permits the reader to see the change. There are unique experiences here but the endpoint underscores a varied and synthesizable product: a history that allows for everyone to be seen in the narrative, unlike the starting point. The history of the 21st century is a history of many parts, like the societies they describe. My own experience in the profession of history differs markedly from the place where patterns began in the late 19th century.

For much of the 20th century, historical analysis was largely descriptive and political, beginning with Henry Adams (1838-1918) and Herbert Baxter Adams (no relation) (1850-1901). They attempted to analyze American state and federal legislatures overexerting themselves to achieve the promise of the United States Constitution. The work—both Henry Adams' exploration of his grandfather's impact on the presidencies of Jefferson and Madison plus the German-influenced model *Johns Hopkins Studies in History and Political Science* (1883-1986), not to mention Herbert Baxter Adams' shaping of the American Historical Association and its professional standards—was gritty and undramatic.¹ These and other

1. Adams, H. B. (1889-91). *A history of the United States during the administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, 1801-1817* (9 Vols). Library of America; Adams, H. B. (1883-1986). *Johns Hopkins University studies in historical and political science* (4 Vols). Johns Hopkins University Press. These two works by Adams will stand for a generation of individuals who formed the first generation of professional historians.

works explored the debates over the Constitution, *The Federalist Papers* and other communiques. They gathered a spate of laws, varying from place to place, but which worked toward an equitable conclusion. Much of a generation's work—the 1890s until after World War I—demonstrated how issues were stretched and bent to result in a more perfect union. The political inheritance of this first generation of professional historians lasted well into the 20th century.²

During the interwar period, some members of the historical profession moved gradually beyond this political schema to related issues. They did not move so far as to establish alternative specialties, remaining within reach of the political culture of their forebears. William A. Dunning (1857-1922) attempted a Southern version of his subject, which downplayed the force of Jim Crow and lionized the achievement of the New South (i.e., one nation).³ Dunning joined a host of scholars, like the founder of the *Journal of Political Science*, John Burgess, (1844-1931) who seconded his interpretation of a South unphased by its Civil War failure and by its unique contribution to a cohesive United States.⁴ This pre-Progressive interpretation ignored the geography and indeed the anthropology of the Southern states.

The average student of American history received these arguments in textbooks, many of which remained within the conceptual boundaries of their subject. Change proceeded from presidential election to presidential election, by the movement of the democratic process, with variants acknowledged only by military movements and wars. Politics, the military, and biographies accounted for the major changes in American society and have led to assumptions that persist today in America's book clubs and select sections of the country. This pragmatic tradition continued thru the 1950s, encapsulated in the textbook tradition of T. Harry Williams (1909-1979), Richard Current (1912-2012), and Frank Freidel (1916-1993), with their work *A History of the United States* (1959), and Samuel Eliot Morison (1887-1976) and Henry Steele Commager, (1902-1998) with their *The Growth of the American Republic* (1930, 7th ed 1980) which disseminated succinctly the hagiography of America's democratic Republic.⁵

American historians were trained to teach this subject matter at the university level after an arduous process of graduate instruction that included comprehensive examinations, multi-year study, several required languages (thought to keep Americans abreast of new European thought on their subject), and an expansive dissertation to demonstrate their intellectual prowess. In their wisdom, the premier universities provided support for no more than three years, though many

2. Banner, J. M., Jr. (2021). *Being a historian: An introduction to the professional world of history*. Cambridge University Press, Ch. 1.

3. Dunning, W. A. (1907). *Reconstruction: Political and economic, 1865-1877*. Harper & Bros.

4. Burgess, J. (1902). *Reconstruction and the Constitution, 1866-1876*. Chas. Scribner's

5. Williams, T. H., Current, R., & Friedel, F. (1959). *A history of the United States*. Alfred Knopf; Morison, S. E., & Commager, H. S. (1930). *The growth of the American republic*. Oxford University Press.

campuses sported research institutes, experimental labs, and related museums to extend graduate assistance to talented students and to render trained labor at very competitive costs. The system developed and preserved by America's higher education institutions lasted largely intact for much of the 20th century. Variation from the established argument became cause for debate. Charles Beard (1874-1948), with *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1912),⁶ received flak for his efforts to argue that America's founders followed their economic interests. He long defended his book as fully documented and argued the necessity of going beyond political parameters. Gradually younger colleagues followed, especially C. Vann Woodward (1908-1999), whose *The Origins of the New South*, did yeoman work to establish a flawed legitimacy to the South's contribution to America's political achievement.⁷ Many others supported Beard's 1927 synthesis *The Rise of American Civilization*, a popular textbook that exemplified the limits of political analysis.⁸ Woodward (b. Arkansas) and Beard (b. Illinois) also personalized the forces of Southern and Midwestern origins that shaped a different view of American history. The historical canon dramatically reflected the external force of interpretation advanced by its handlers; America's became malleable.

Beard's economic interpretation of legislative direction stimulated alternative explorations. Thomas Cochran began his probe into business and capitalist practices at New York University after completing his doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania. By his 1972 presidential address to his colleagues in the American Historical Association, two world wars presented great challenges to democracy.⁹ Instead of confirming the triumph of the victory, Cochran argued that the outcome of the wars accentuated the meaning of democracy, instilling a more concrete version of the term.

College and university students increasingly leaned toward (or demanded by turns) that democratic equality deliver on its promise to every citizen. Populist movements influenced not only scholarship but the nature of government. The Civil Rights movement, the women's movement, and environmental activism rose up in many departments as legitimate subjects for exploration. These events made clear how important histories outside the walls were (and had been) to the operations within the halls of scholarship.

The dynamics of the wars also created a separate population of scholars escaping Nazi tyranny and emigrating to the United States for refuge. These scholars brought

6. Beard, C. A. (1913). *An economic interpretation of the constitution*. Macmillan.

7. Woodward, C. V. (1951). *The origins of the New South*. Louisiana State University Press.

8. Beard, C. A. (1927). *The rise of American civilization*. The Macmillan Co. See also Fox, R. W., & Kloppenberg, J. K. (Eds.). (1995). *A companion to American thought*. Blackwell Publishers, pp. 59-60, 745-746.

9. See <https://historians.org/about-aha-and-archives/presidential-addresses/Thomas-C.-Cochran>; https://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas-C.-Cochran_historian. **Note: Looks like link is insecure. Cut or fix. See also Novick, P. (1988). *That noble dream: The "objectivity question" and the American historical profession*. Cambridge University Press, Ch. 7.

new methodologies and theories of historical inquiry quite foreign to Americans. They studied problems of dictatorship, identity, crowd dynamics, and more.¹⁰

In particular, the French *Annales* school not only practiced a different historiography, but they also published their findings in a distinct, influential journal. That cohort in particular examined distinct social groups that influenced politics: labor, immigrants, family, schools, students, or, in a word, ordinary folk who often voted with their feet. Human migration became an important topic, as well as the normal transportation of citizens from one place to another. Initially this scholarship was considered hyper-specialized compared with the practice of American political inquiry. From the late 1950s and 1960s, the *Annales* alternative began to influence America's scholarly canon itself and cause a revolution in the methodology and interpretation of historical inquiry.

A postwar generation of scholars published on a range of new topics that by the early 21st century had yet to be synthesized into a new canon. In history at least, the American research experience has differed markedly from the collegiate experience. Graduate study in history during the 1960s and 1970s had several distinct characteristics. First, individual biography no longer became personalized or single person centered. Instead, biography illuminated larger historical trajectories. Second, institutions became the subject of historical inquiry; scholars studied step-by-step progressions which affected the many rather than the few. Third, new technological devices—computers and camcorders for documentaries—led to new forms of participation during the inquiry process itself; one's colleagues became sympathetic critics during the process of building an interpretation, rather than simply offering judgement at the end.

For the first time, large topics like 20th century cities became the target of group endeavors. Possibilities opened for humanists to follow the lead of physical and social scientists in group research. None of these developments occurred overnight; it took many years for older habits to break down and be replaced by new modular approaches. In many places today, the two traditions operate side by side.¹¹

In the early 1970s, as I began to search for employment opportunities, the academic door began to close. During the 1960s, medical schools, for example, looked with favor upon pre-meds who majored in non-scientific topics like philosophy, English, or history. Similarly, schools of education took advantage of the proliferation of graduates majoring in non-political topics: children, teachers, high schools, colleges and universities, research and professional associations, philanthropy.

My thoughts turned to the University of Wisconsin, drawn by Merle Curti's reputation. At the same time, such a choice brought with it considerable hesitation.

10. Banner, J. M., Jr. (2021). *The ever-changing past: Why all history is revisionist history*. Yale University Press, pp. 152; Mattingly, P. H. (2017). *American academic cultures*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 331-334.

11. Graff, H. J., Moch, L. P., & McMichael, P. (Eds.). (2000). *Looking backward, looking forward: Perspectives on social science history*. University of Wisconsin Press.

My own historical training had American History under my belt according to Morison and Commager; my training also included work by Curti's student Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in America*, a classic study of a major movement that required a number of outreaches and techniques that recently came into the historical canon.¹² Hofstadter's book was particularly intriguing to me.

In addition, Merle Curti stood out as the premiere scholar of the new intellectual history. His book, *The Growth of American Thought*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1944. That same year, he was elected president of both the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association. Notably, he began his career at Teachers College, Columbia University, where he produced his influential study *Social Ideas of American Educators*. Curti did not have to be persuaded to assist me, a flailing student who wished to explore the 19th century origins of professional educators.¹³ At the time, I could not see the advantage of career appointments that led from my topic to university teaching.

So, I was both in and out of the reigning wisdom. Fortunately, I quickly acquired Wisconsin roommates from Harvard and MIT, Don Scott and Lee Kelley, respectively. They were well versed in the study of sociology, anthropology, and psychology, now thought to be resources rather than competitors of history. I was also seriously dating a young woman, later my wife, who would complete her doctorate at Teachers College, Columbia University with a dissertation that relied heavily upon émigré scholars like Roman Jakobson and international scholars like Jean Piaget.¹⁴ In 1962, my own alma mater, Georgetown University, had still been under the influence of a traditional humanism that eschewed sociology and anthropology and quietly put psychology under the aegis of philosophy.¹⁵ I had superlative teachers at both Georgetown and Wisconsin. I did a great deal of reading to bring myself shoulder to shoulder with existing academic wisdom. This period represented the beginning of my interdisciplinary training, all beyond the courses I was enrolled in.

My teaching assistant (TA) position in Wisconsin's department of history began in my third year of graduate study. I received second-year funding from Curti's endowed chair, the Frederick Jackson Turner Chair of American History. That appointment was doubly fitting since Curti had been one of Turner's last students. The stipend offered to me was, unlike support from my TA position, non-taxable. I served as Curti's research assistant and worked hard to satisfy his

12. Hofstadter, R. (1944). *Social Darwinism in America*. University of Pennsylvania Press; Brown, D. S. (2006). *Richard Hofstadter: An intellectual biography*. University of Chicago Press.

13. Curti, M. E. (1943). *The growth of American thought*. Harpers and Sons; Curti, M. E. (1959). *The social ideas of American educators*. Littlefield Adams Co. (Original work published 1935);

14. Mattingly, J. (1978). Semantic relations and grammatical forms of language delayed preschoolers [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Teachers College, Columbia University.

15. Curran, R. E. (2010). *A history of Georgetown University*. Georgetown University Press; Curti, M. E., & Carstensen, V. (1949). *The University of Wisconsin*. University of Wisconsin Press.

requirements—researching the psychology of human nature via international scholars (hardly the focus of his discipline’s discourse), his current preoccupation. I pressed him to include American artists in his panoply, which never worked despite his own urging for someone to study the famous Wisconsin artist Georgia O’Keeffe.

In the face of retirement, Curti taught the American history survey (a reassertion of his discipline’s political/military discourse) Once, attempting to corral his acquiescence in some project, I came late to his class for a permission or signature and simply sat and listened. I was stunned with the accuracy and simplicity of his presentation and had a bracing lesson in the merits of his own generation’s contribution, synthesis, when my generation cultivated analysis, a debunking of the current wisdom in whatever the topic. While he traveled, he urged me to use his carrell in the University of Wisconsin Memorial Library, where I spent many hours absorbing the literatures I needed for modern historiography.

My TA work was largely with William R. Taylor (1922-2014), who had been recruited from his Amherst and Harvard to replace the aging Curti.¹⁶ At the time, Amherst College was the basecamp for American studies, already interdisciplinary and receptive to Annales’ teachings. Many students gravitated to Taylor’s embrace of new topics—family, occupation, work, diet, etc.—to advance the cause of American intellectual/cultural history. I took his course before I served as his TA for the same course. Much later, I had a New York City lunch conversation with him about the disparity between the two courses. The notes for the two same lectures were dramatically different. “The exciting part was only partially the subject matter,” I confessed to him. “What was equally arresting was the fact that you were re-thinking the subject matter in front of the audience.” Ever since, I have tried to rework my subject matter before and during lecture and discussion sections, seeking to generate new insights from familiar texts in situ. My focus shifted to getting all the varied pieces into some essential focus rather than defending a discourse. It is possible, I have learned from experience, for every lecture to have the quality of drama and discovery of something new.

After working with Taylor for two years, I gravitated willingly to lecture work in the School of Education and to Merle Borrowman. Borrowman held a joint appointment with the educators as well as the historians, much like Lawrence Cremin, his friend and colleague at Wisconsin when he wrote his first Pulitzer Prize book, *The Transformation of the School* (1961), who held a joint appointment at Teachers College and Columbia University’s history department. Borrowman set a broad context in his course for my own work on teachers in the 19th century, especially members of the American Institute of Instruction. If he was not up to

16. Taylor, W. R. (1961). *Cavalier and Yankee: The old South and the American national character*. George Braziller. This book focuses on the mythologies of the South and the North and their tightening as 1860 approached. The book used rather than reported the intellectual changes to demonstrate a powerful national transformation, a tremendous, revolutionary alteration of the historical discipline.

speed on the Annales school, as Taylor was with the new features of his subject, Borrowman was always supportive of history students as his TAs, especially ones not enslaved to a discipline. He was not only instrumental in my completing the degree, but he was also strategically helpful in planting my early career in the School of Education at New York University, which sought faculty members with disciplinary specializations. It may have been Curti's association that advanced my prospects, but it was Borrowman who facilitated my transfer from Wisconsin to Manhattan. It isn't always one's major professor who makes the difference.¹⁷

The other factor influencing my six years (1962-1968) of graduate study (when the average was nine and counting) was the birth of my son, Stephen, in 1966. I had married in 1964, and my wife took, first, a teaching position in Mt. Horeb, the center of American chiropractic (in a house designed in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright by one of his students). Afterward (1966-68), Jane worked and studied psychology in the School of Education, working with Prof. Ted Harris, and his *Journal of Educational Research*, the outlet for the influential American Educational Research Association. She would drive me to my Park Street office in my later graduate years and say as I left, "Finish that thesis. You now have a child!"

Indeed, many of my colleagues had refrained from having children until 1964 when we all had at least one child. No one had money but we did have each other. The kids entertained themselves in one corner while their parents traded academic lore among themselves. These informal gatherings included fellow historians Steve Nissenbaum and his wife Judy, a creative musicologist; David Allmendinger, and his wife Susan, a computer maven; Don Scott and later his wife Joan, who finished a distinguished career in French and women's history in the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, New Jersey. Eventually, all had stellar academic careers.

Then we simply created our own seminar with food and made our own entertainment, mixing serious and frivolous talk. In this setting, we exchanged many ideas and books, a number far beyond our specializations. The major lesson in moving from a history degree (premised on a confined body of scholarship) to an interdisciplinary one is that it's the quality of the university and student interactions that counts for any degree program. Does it provide time and opportunity to engage folks unlike oneself? Does it encourage a mixing of talents and experiences? Does it provide space for informed, informal interchange?

The University of Wisconsin had a well-deserved reputation as a progressive institution, but in the 1960s, though it was impossibly frugal with salaries, it opened a vast array of visions and opportunities to advance intellectually. Its location on Lake Mendota (the site of many fishing expeditions), its nearby Picnic Point (where family and friends often walked), its size and mixture of

17. Borrowman, M. (1961). *The liberal and the technical in American education*. Teachers College Press; Cremin, L. (1964). *The transformation of the school: Progressivism in American education, 1876-1957*. Vintage Books. (Original work published 1961)

students (more than 25% from out of state), its respected history and tradition (“sifting and winnowing” were not mere words) made for an extraordinary place, one that gave me the ability to shift from existing coursework to something more, always educational.

In my final year at Wisconsin, I taught—as a departmental instructor—Biography in American History. I began with Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*. The course was a breakthrough in my own and the department’s history. It challenged the 18th-century commitment to religiosity, it established Franklin’s deism, and it exposed his expectation of the unexpected. The goal was to make Franklin’s the new voice of 18th-century values, distinctly 18th century even if one did not know the speaker. There were no long-term solutions, only short-term respites, not even Franklin’s long-term preoccupation with moral achievement, a major episode in his book and a parody of the ubiquitous divine from his contemporary, Jonathan Edwards. Franklin makes his own achievement of moral success a failure because of his achievement. His triumph would have made him proud of his moral superiority. The 18th-century thinker faced an endless array of contradictions. Nevertheless, he groped forward, experiment by experiment. What I established in the course was an 18th-century record that was problematic, permanently problematic in an 18th-century guise, unlike anything before or since. The course continued similarly through the 20th century, establishing a point of view distinctly time-bound. Each individual biography in the course represented a time-bound, historically distinct perspective. This interdisciplinary semester was for me life-changing, regardless of what it was for those enrolled.

At New York University (NYU), I taught many courses but the central one was History of American Education, where I elaborated on my Wisconsin course in biography but turned to “educational” voices. At the least, I communicated what history offered, and many students, after their coursework, came to me for doctoral guidance. This shift was a serious intellectual and economic problem, since most students had already fulfilled their course requirements. At that time, both departments History of Education and Philosophy of Education provided foundational courses for all students in the program. However, the Dean would not enforce “transfer equivalences” awarded by a student’s host department. As a result, many students entered the school with foundations requirements waived, (a curricular issue which I never solved, even as Chairman of Cultural Foundations [1974-81]).

My courses required reading in multiple subjects, not obviously historical. They attracted many students from departments that respected the foundations requirement, especially the department of higher education, the department of nursing (where the best prepared students congregated), and Neal Postman’s imaginative department of media ecology. In the 1970s, NYU was a distinctly urban university, where the students came from many occupations and ages and, in particular, wished to receive teaching credentials to stay out of the Vietnam War draft. There was never a problem initiating discussion with students who were labor leaders,

evangelical ministers, and so on: a real city congregation. The discussion went beyond history and drew us all into interdisciplinary realms, the morality of war, the responsibility of individuals, the legitimacy of government, etc.

During my time at NYU's School of Education, my student, Marilyn Tobias, persuaded me to create a process by which we could organize some research in the field of education. We compiled a roster of scholars with whom we would like to work and had them commit time to research. At the time, many organizations sought to bridge their work between the federal government and the university. Ms. Tobias went to Washington to raise money for such an enterprise. She called the organization Potomac Educational Resources Inc (PERI). After a good deal of work, she secured a grant to study a key program at the National Institute of Education (NIE). I researched and conducted interviews with her, and together we wrote a report: "Equity and the Educational Bureaucracy: An Episode at the National Institute of Education" (December, 1979), which we presented to the professionals, many of whom were players in the research. We circulated the document to other members of the program, a central strategy in public history. We then held a larger meeting with members of the NIE. The key feature and the novel dimension of this enterprise was an historical evaluation of NIE's Program to Increase Participation of Women and Minorities in Educational Research and Development. Revisions followed and larger issues emerged about engineering a democracy. The key person in the episode was Patricia Graham of Teachers College, Columbia University, who became the director of the NIE under President Jimmy Carter and the finest director in the history of NIE.¹⁸ In due course, the report took final form and was published in the *History of Education Quarterly* (after I had left the editorship) as "Race, Gender and Equity Policy: The Case of the National Institute of Education" in the Winter 1999 issue of the journal. Tobias and I thought it a high point of PERI's historical scholarship and a model of what historical evaluation could do for an ongoing program, many individuals of which were not historians.¹⁹

18. Graham, P. (2005). *Schooling America*. Oxford University Press. This book gives the framework for much of her decision making during her directorship. In all her administrative work as in her scholarship, Graham never questions why she did not get what she expected from her well-funded Ivy League colleagues. Did she not see that in the nation's schools which did the work of "advancement" there were teachers who could speak to her issues?

19. Mattingly, P. H., & Bernstein, R. (1998). The pedagogy of public history. *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 18(1), 77-92. See, as well, the New York University Archives, Program in Public History, where one can begin with *The Public History Newsletter* [1984-2004]. The Newsletter accounted for all initial placements of the graduates of the program in Public History. I was fortunate in attracting superlative talent to the teaching portion of the program, blessedly outside the mainstream discipline of history: Rachel Bernstein, especially for oral history; Barbara Abrash in media and history; and particularly George C. Stoney, a consummate, award-winning documentarian (1916-2021), who came to New York University in 1971 and taught there (mostly in the Tisch Schools of the Arts) until

In 1981, NYU ordered that the School of Education's teaching staff produce sufficient revenue to cover their salaries. Educational values were set aside here, even though the School of Education usually carried NYU through its several economic dark nights. At the same time, the department of history, under the superlative leadership of its chair Carl Prince (the best chair during my tenure), sought to create a program in public history. Many of the older, tenured members of the department chose to avoid association with new professional developments. Only a few, like Prof. Danny Walkowitz (who trained at the University of Rochester under the aegis of Herbert Gutman [a distinguished graduate of the University of Wisconsin] and was an advocate of the Annales School and E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*), looked forward to this new initiative. Prince extracted me from the School of Education and set the new program in motion, headed by myself and Walkowitz, who proved to be an exceptional colleague.

The program in public history was interdisciplinary with connections to the Tisch School of the Arts, an exceptional facility and group of scholars, and other departments. The program required a course in statistics plus Annales-inspired courses in social history, which, at the time, I had not completely mastered. In interdisciplinary work, learning is ongoing, never ending. Three courses structured the initial offering: Local and Community History, Media and History, and History and Public Policy. We later added a research course—Introduction to Public History—with a unifying topic (usually an urban space like Union Square or the Lower East Side, which had no archives as such) to which students were assigned in groups and produced ultimately a documentary on their research (with help from the Tisch faculty and students, especially their exceptional documentarian, Prof. George Stoney).

his death. He was “the father of public-access television.” The George Stoney Award is made annually by New York University's Alternate Media Center. He distinguished Rachel Bernstein, with her PhD in history from Rutgers, took her interests in working class history into her courses in Introduction to Public History and Oral History for more than 25 years. She currently works as director of Labor/Arts and is associated with NYU's Tamiment Library and Robert Wagner Archives. With Debra Rinehardt, she is a co-author of *Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives* (2000, New York University Press).

Barbara Abrash has worked all her life in the documentary industry, serving as co-director of *The Molders of Troy* (1980) and *Still Waters: The Story of Angie Debo* (1984), an examination of the life of an Oklahoman native American with degrees in history from the University of Chicago. Abrash also co-produced *Perestroika from Below* (1992), a documentary on the Russian workers strike of 1989, and was an advisor on *The Brothers of Kappa Pi* (2009). She is a co-producer of one episode of *The American Experience* (1987) and co-editor of *Mediating History* (1992, New York University Press).

In my recommendations to the public history components of the University of Massachusetts (under David Glassberg) and American University (under Alan Kraut), the model stayed with me, as it did in my public history work for Lord Day Lord, the oldest law firm in New York City, and my entries for it in the *Encyclopedia of New York City* (1995, Yale University Press), edited by Kenneth Jackson.

Our learning curve was evident. Even when the best applicants to the department headed to the program, supportive colleagues at the elevator would ask (tongue in cheek), “What is public history? Then laugh. The achievement and placement of graduates told its own story, and the laughter became appreciative and full-throated. I directed the program for 25 years and never lost my enthusiasm for instruction, especially its interdisciplinary component. Everyone learned the advantages of oral history and the power of collective images, essential for collaborative research.

In the late 1980s, the course in Local and Community History received an additional bonus. Prof. Bert Salwen—professor of anthropology, “the father of urban archeology,” and former director of NYU Graduate Studies—discovered that the course fit well with his new invention, historical archeology. He and I created a doctoral program in the subject and began to involve his former and current students, including Nan Rothchild, Diana Wall, Rebecca Yemin, and Sarah Bridges, all who went on to achieve distinguished careers in New York and Philadelphia. They literally dug up artifacts relating to urban archeology, say with their Sullivan Street Project, where at one point a reconstructed outhouse gave up a gold wedding ring. Salwen got so much mileage out of “the construction of a context,” from “Opps” to “That Bastard!” Yet, the power of artifact and place was made manifest. We segued experiences like this into visits to local museums to consider how their imaginative staffers reconstructed historical contexts. The pattern taught us much about the careful calibration of context and the variety of narratives to be applied. Historians also learned how cavalier archeologists could be with dates.²⁰

The most important course I taught at NYU’s program in public history was *The Material Culture of American Life*.²¹ The course demanded that students become familiar with the use of a camcorder and film editing—and master a body of literature. That literature focused on things and stuff rather than documents by themselves. The endpoint was a documentary, for which everyone met with me one-on-one during the first three weeks of class. The assignment began with previewing the argument with five visuals. If they did not have the visuals, students had to describe what they needed. In the next three classes, we discussed required readings and previewed the research scenarios. Every member strived to be critical and supportive, knowing they would all be on the block before the next few weeks were over.

20. ²² Rothchild, N. A. (1990). Memorial: Bert Salwen, 1920-1988. *Historical Archeology*, 24(1), 104-109; Williams, L. E., Rothchild, N. A., & di Zerega Wall, D. (1993). Bert Salwen: Involvement with historical archeology and cultural resource management, late 1960s-1988. *Northwest Historical Archeology*, 22, 119-22.

21. See Conway, J. C. (1994). *True north*. Alfred Knopf. This book recounts autobiographically her time in the United States. Her later work—Conway, J. C. (1998). *When memory speaks: Exploring the art of autobiography*. Vintage Books—gives some indication of her originality in this field. As well, see Paul Bourke’s citation in the *Dictionary of Australian Biography*. See also Bourke, P., & DeBates, D. (1995). *Washington County: Politics and community in Antebellum America*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

My own criticism was minimal, since the varied views of all covered the waterfront. Everyone was aware of each other's interpretation. Criticism aimed to be constructive, and it was. Students were imaginative, hard-nosed but suggested how problems could be remedied. Their collective criticism came at a time when something could be done (i.e., incorporated into the final draft). The class explored required readings side by side with their critiques of their own work plus revisions. The constant back-and-forth of reading and collective, mutually supportive criticism enabled us all to see ourselves as working together on common projects. The semester ended with each student sharing their documentary over two days. George Stoney, the distinguished NYU documentarian, participated and was thrilled by what he witnessed. At one point, he turned to a student and said he would use her work rather than the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) documentary of New York architecture, represented by the simultaneous construction of the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building. The student, not a history major, was thrilled that he proposed to use her version of the same event. "I now have something," she said, "to show my parents about what I have done with all their tuition money." It was a singular moment! Not just hers, but every student's documentary was PBS worthy.

All the while exercising my intensively interdisciplinary outreach, I continued to edit the *History of Education Quarterly* from 1974 to 1985. I began my association with this international journal in 1968 as the book review editor. In this role, I had the extraordinary assistance of two part-time managing editors, Roberta Frankfort and Robin Berson, two savvy and witty colleagues (Dear Berson Person, one author wrote, not knowing whether Robin was a male or female). I shamelessly copied the *New York Review of Books* review model—several books together and sufficient space for reviewers to advance their own interpretations. This approach allowed me to assert more control over the contents of the journal even though I wasn't selecting research articles, like the editorial board. I sought to integrate many social historians who for one reason or another avoided education as a subject when they considered non-political themes.

Gradually, I incorporated a number of distinguished scholars like Charles Tilly, Daniel Walker Howe, and Christopher Hill, as well as singular scholars of American educational history like Michael B. Katz (1939-2014). These historians took their subjects beyond American borders and introduced readers to the methods of the Annales school and the new social history. In addition to extending the journal's range of approaches to education, I initiated special issues that showcased the superlative scholarship of individuals like Jill Conway (1934-2018) and Paul Bourke (1938-1999), both transplanted Australians,²² and I brought in new editors who could watch for emergent scholars. Financially, this outreach intersected with history of education associations world-wide at a time when, for example, China purchased the back issues of scholarly journals. The additional revenue translated into larger

22. Mattingly, P. H., & Banner, J. M., Jr. (2015). James McLachlan, historian of education, public historian, AHA member (1932-2015). *Perspectives on history*.

single issues, two indexes, and increased subscribership. Ultimately, I persuaded James McLachlan, a student of Richard Hofstadter at Columbia, to co-edit the journal, and, in the mid-1980s, the *HEQ* reached its apogee of contributors.²³

With the program in public history and the *HEQ* plus my teaching and administrative responsibilities, I had little time for my own scholarly and public writing. Unlike many of my colleagues, I could not teach and write without one or the other suffering. My writing moved slowly, first a few added chapters to my dissertation, published in 1976, *The Classless Profession: American Schoolmen in the Nineteenth Century*. That year I also initiated what I expected to be an ongoing relationship with New York University Press such that they would publish *HEQ* special issues as books. The first was in 1973 on women and education, followed by two others: one on Canadian education and the other on John Dewey. Unfortunately, only the Canadian issue ever materialized as a book and received the exposure that the scholarship merited.

Meanwhile, in Leonia, New Jersey—my family residence while teaching at NYU—the local mayor tasked me with securing funds for research about older buildings. I argued that we first needed to research and establish the need for preservation. I applied for and received a grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission. Those funds provided seed money for research on the town as well as acid-free containers and a nascent archive for the town of Leonia. In the course of training for the project, several well-educated residents—Stanford, Bryn Mawr, and Smith graduates—helped the team pursue an oral history of suburbanization, something about which I knew little.

Once the project was underway, I discovered in Leonia an art colony associated with Manhattan's burgeoning mass magazines and their need for illustration. One discovery led to others: the myopia of existing suburban literature as well as the short-sightedness of the available literature on American art. These topics began to fuse as we turned the subject matter of art and its influence on national tastes to the mythology of "country town" (a self-referent). Was it possible to make a case for the art and let it become historical evidence? What was really at issue when artists debated the relationship of easel art to objective art? Why did our national museums favor abstract art and modern art when there were other options, options that people seemed to appreciate more or at least recognize more readily? What, in fact, was meant by "a country town" in a community adjacent to a major metropolis? Did fictional myths illuminate living arrangements and historical aspirations? These questions led to new literatures and opportunities for thinking about social history beyond its relationship to actual political life. In turn, such public history investigations and considerations intensified my interdisciplinary work.

The local public became involved in ways we could not anticipated. For example, they collected art, hung it on their walls. My resident colleagues discovered the same. We began to see over time—three generations—that social

23. Burke, P. (2000). *The social history of knowledge*. Polity Press.

arrangements altered but the mythology of a country town did not, even after the last farm within town limits was gone. We discovered that art represented more than landscapes or portraits; it embodied the values of intellect and education and helped celebrate the town Nobel laureates, its movie stars, its university faculty, its schools, its quality of life. In retrospect, many individuals—few of them artists themselves—took pride in dubbing their community “the Athens of New Jersey,” an attribute that continues to this day. Suddenly mythology—which I had studied long ago in my work with William R. Taylor and the tightening ante-bellum mythology of Cavalier and Yankee—bore strange fruit. Finally, I wrote the history of the town over three generations and clocked its differences and similarities in *Suburban Landscapes: Culture and Politics in a New York Metropolitan Community*, published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 2001. This study was an interdisciplinary project that went far beyond the boundaries of a specific town, something that the reviewers typically did not see.

Much of this research found its way into the dynamics of the Social Science History Association (1997-2010) and my work with Harvey J. Graff, also a great student of mythology, whom I met in 1973 in Chicago.²⁴ He was a student of Michael B. Katz and the author of several books about the role of myth in society and culture. At the Social Science History Association annual meetings, Harvey and I organized a number of innovative panels that explored the discourse on cities, suburbs, and education. We used these sessions as an early warning system to probe and receive reactions concerning historical issues.

Such work represented, if I may, a model of what professional associations should do to advance their field's multiple discourses. Many of these panels drew upon my work with the Elizabeth (NJ) Historical Society, which I helped found in 1999. In each subsequent year, I researched, wrote, and presented to Elizabethans an episode in the history of a major New Jersey city: Elizabeth, the home of Singer Sewing Machine (and my home after November 1, 1988). With Singer in town, Elizabeth also served as the godmother of many other corporations and experimental social organizations. For seven years—until 2014—I served as president of the Elizabeth Historical Society and even now work as a trustee from afar. Their website contains documentaries of each episode of the city's history and is the equivalent of a book, unreviewed by the major journals and outlets of the profession. Why, after so many overtures? Among other innovations, each episode takes a documentable neighborhood and uses it as the center of ethnic life for relevant groups, a summa interdisciplinary experience, using photos (many taken by myself) as historical evidence, a model investigation into a city's history.

In retirement, I developed my own reading of suburbs and higher education, publishing several books, including *American Academic Cultures*, published by

24. Graff, H. J. (1979). *The literacy myth: Literacy and social structure in the nineteenth century city*. Academic Press; Graff, H. J. (2008). *The Dallas myth: The making and unmaking of an American city*. University of Minnesota Press.

the University of Chicago Press. Every chapter provides a reworking, an innovation, of existing historical wisdom, this time taken from outside the walls academic spaces, something rarely done in the field. Much of the material may not seem at first glance educational, but, I contend, it was and is as higher education necessitates research into far-reaching materials.

With my contribution to suburban scholarship—*An American Art Colony*—I tried, especially in the first chapter, to make real a public history comment made by a cherished colleague, Michael Frisch, many years ago: “A true public history,” he argued, “would contain as part of the argument, the process of coming to the central issue, a history within the history.” I did my best in several italicized paragraphs to realize his admonition.²⁵ What emerged was an exploration of the possibilities of collective biography—170 profiles of artists over 3 generations and another kind of public history, one told through the lives of individuals, perhaps the only methodology for studying voluntary associations, like an art colony. Among other things, the study also advanced a new argument about the possibilities of collective lives and presented another perspective on modern art.²⁶ Alas, publishers are not interested; they remain in a backwater that belongs to an earlier stage of historical development, a long-standing, self-inflicted problem of this profession. What to do?

In the course of these endeavors, I began to grasp the priority of adjacent historical institutions and attendant historical work, like state historical societies, genealogical societies, museums, and historical disciplines in various venues, each with their distinctive publications. This insight channeled into my own personal genealogical work, which took me back to 17th century colonial Maryland. I had hard data on family births, marriages, occupations and deaths, but I had little else. Here, I understood that historical scholarship on colonial Maryland—superb and comprehensive work—could fill in the blanks about the growing of tobacco, the provision of food in early settlement life, the survival techniques of people without gunpowder in a hostile neighborhood, the number of family members, the relations with native Americans, etc. Accordingly, I synthesized this colonial literature and incorporated it into the genealogical matrix. When the colonial Mattingly family moved to Washington, DC—another place with a superb body of historical research and writing—I repeated my process to synthesize the literature with genealogical records to establish the context of mysterious lives. Gradually, general observations attached to particular profiles. What emerged from this endeavor is a new kind of genealogical cum historical symbiosis.²⁷

25. Frisch, M. (1990). *A shared authority: Essays on the craft and meaning of oral and public history*. State University of New York Press.

26. Burke, P. (2001). *Eyewitnessing: The uses of images as historical evidence*. Cornell University Press.

27. Mattingly, P. H. (2023). *The descendants of Thomas Mattingly* (private printing). This application also occurred in my ten books on tourism, my memorials to my mother (*Memorial*) and my wife (*Dear Folks*), and an autobiography entitled *Until Now* (2023).

At this point, so much historical research has become so interdisciplinary that I no longer think of it as a special exercise. It is simply the way good history is done.²⁸ In the end, interdisciplinary history is an approach with many arrows in its quiver; it is not taught as such in American universities, but it can be learned.²⁹ It is an effort to avoid specialization, to register ordinary people's concerns in the history, to use ordinary folk/amateurs to focus historical issues, especially change, and to use all available assets and data, including new technologies and media. These days, new interdisciplinary work goes in many directions and now makes an earlier time, when synthesis was taken for granted, a virtual impossibility. While new scholarship has brought with it an intellectual problem that remains unsolved—what to do about synthesis—for the moment, let us enjoy our many-strand products.

28. Mattingly, P. H. (2005). Good history [a lecture presented to the history majors of New York University and their presents]. Ireland House, New York University. The lecture invokes my kinsman, Garrett Mattingly, whose major opus, *The Armada*, won the 1960 Pulitzer Prize and set a standard for me for the history discipline, blending both many disciplines and multiple languages as well as serving as both analysis and synthesis. See Gershoy, L. (1965). Garrett Mattingly: A personal appreciation. In C. H. Carter (Ed.), *From the Renaissance to the Counter Reformation: Essays in honor of Garrett Mattingly*. Random House; Hexter, J. H. (1971). Garrett Mattingly, historian. In *Doing History* (pp. 157-171, 178-179). Indiana University Press; Kingdon, R. (1982). Garrett Mattingly. *The American Scholar, Summer*. See also Thomson, V. (1966). *Virgil Thomson*. Alfred Knopf. See also Banner, J. M. (2012). *Being a Historian; An Introduction to the Professional World of History*. Cambridge University Press. One of the stellar features of this book is its sensitivity to non-academic adventures in historical research as well as public dissemination, especially in Chapter 2. Chapter 5 is the nearest thing we have to a history of the interdisciplinary effort, public history, which began in the early 1980s.

29. Boix, V., & Lenoir, Y. (2010). Interdisciplinarity in United States schools: Past, present, future. *Issues in Integrative Studies*, 28, 1-27. See also Jacobs, J. (2013). *In defense of disciplines: Interdisciplinarity and specialization in the research university*. University of Chicago Press; Graff, H. J. (2015). *Undisciplining knowledge: Interdisciplinarity in the twentieth century*. Johns Hopkins University Press.