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Public History: Intellectual Inquiry in a Community Context

For many historians, public history is akin to class room teaching. It represents an opportunity for specialized scholars to educate either the uninformed audiences of museum visitors or the less-than-intellectual technicians at historic sites and museums. This is an understandable error. Ever since historians began practicing their craft in institutions other than colleges and universities, they have focused their energies on insisting that public and academic history are one and the same. As a result, neither practicing public historians nor our academic peers are entirely sure how best to describe the unique intellectual content and pedagogical methods that make public history a distinct (if closely related) profession.

In an informal talk, drawing heavily on my own experience as a practicing public historian, I will paint a more compelling portrait of public history's professionalism and scholarly importance. In the realm of public history, research is presented not in definitive lecture form, but in service to the needs and interests of complex stakeholders for whom history, very often, is both present and important. In this way, public history is not simply "applied history." Rather, public historians integrate diverse perspectives and discover new areas of inquiry through active civic engagement. By fostering and participating in open dialog with museum professionals, history buffs, and others across traditional disciplinary and institutional boundaries, public historians identify important new research questions and generate new knowledge about the past.