

Introduction to Public History



Historical marker and monument to Stonewall Jackson in Clarksburg, West Virginia.

HIST 412 | Fall 2025
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11:30AM – 12:45PM
Woodburn Hall G11

Instructor: Dr. Michael Allen
Office: Chitwood 220
Office Hours: Mondays & Wednesdays 10:00AM – 12:00PM & by appointment
Email: michael.allen@mail.wvu.edu

INFORMATION

Description

This course offers an introduction to the field of public history, which translates historical knowledge to the general public. You will learn how public history differs from academic history both in method and in credentialing, and you will learn about the theories and practices behind the field. Public history is key to understanding historic monuments and markers, archives, oral history, museums, historic preservation and public interpretation, and we will cover a wide overview of these ways of practicing history. We will study closely how the engagement of history by the general public can be an arena for contesting societal issues of identity, nation, race, gender, class and religion.

Learning Objectives

- Students will critically evaluate public history trends, controversies, and debates;
- Students will learn and apply archival research methodologies;
- Students will learn and apply communication techniques for academic and nonacademic audiences;
- Students will understand and assess the connections between public history and other fields, such as museum studies, cultural resource management, community development, and tourism studies.

Office Hours

I keep office hours to support you, so please make use of them. I also understand that the regular hours may not work for students, and am available to schedule an appointment on campus or virtually. I can likely meet by appointment right before our class meeting time.

Academic Policies

Please familiarize yourself with WVU's academic policies, including those pertaining to academic integrity and standards, inclusivity and equity, COVID-19, class recording, and mental health, among others. You can find these statements here:

<https://tlcommons.wvu.edu/syllabus-policies-and-statements>

Course Delivery and Organization

This course is an in-person lecture and discussion-based class. Course material, including assignments, will be delivered via eCampus, organized by week. I may amend the syllabus as the semester progresses, but all major readings are included here.

Assignments and Evaluation

Attendance and Participation	15%
Exam #1	20%
Exam #2	20%
Midterm Paper	20%
Final Project Proposal	5%
Final Project	20%

GRADING AND ASSIGNMENTS

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory, but can be excused with instructor permission. You are allowed three unexcused absences before penalties begin to accrue. Excuses will be made for health and mental health reasons as well as personal crises, and can be made for travel or activities related to other courses or university activities. Please confer with me as soon as possible about any requests for an excuse, and do so *before* the session you would need to miss. Unexcused absences will proportionally affect the “Attendance and Participation” portion of your course grade. Given the single weekly meeting time, the class cannot function without your arriving prepared and ready for discussion.

While the use of electronic devices is necessary to access eBooks and PDFs, as well as to enhance learning by looking up things to share with the class or looking up terms and phrases (or translating if English is not your first language), it can be distracting if activity is unrelated to learning. I reserve the right to request that you put electronic devices away if I feel that your use is problematic.

Participation

Each undergraduate student will be responsible for responding to one day’s readings and themes with a brief set of questions for class discussion, taking up no more than 7 minutes. The goal is to spark participation. The student will follow the introductory lecture or presentation by the instructor or guest. These dates will be assigned in week 2.

Graduate students enrolled in the course will make a longer presentation of 10-15 minutes on their assigned dates. These will include reflections on central ideas in the readings.

Exams

There will be two exams consisting of essay responses to questions. These exams will allow students to demonstrate their mastery of course readings, and will require citations of works. Exams will be open-book and posted on eCampus one week before their due date.

Midterm Paper

Students will write a midterm research paper on themes related to the final project. Undergraduate students should submit a 5-7 page paper in a 12-point typeface with citations formatted in the Chicago Manual of Style. Graduate students should submit papers of 7-10 pages with the same requirements. A detailed assignment sheet for the midterm paper will be circulated in week 3.

Final Project

The final project will focus on histories of the WVU campus and Morgantown, and will invite students to offer speculative proposals for monuments, markers, small exhibitions, podcasts or walking tour itineraries. The course will identify a set of sites and/or stories and students will form groups around them. While work will be individual, the final presentations will be made by the groups together. There

may be an installation of course work as well, with details to come. The final project will be discussed in full detail in week 8, but its possibilities will come up before then too. Proposals for final projects will consist of a one or two paragraph-long summary that will count for 5% of the overall course grade, with the final project itself counting for 25%.

Optional Field Trips

There are two optional field trips (and others could be added based on interest) on Saturdays. Attendance on the field trips yields three extra points toward the overall course grade.

Late Work/Extensions

Late work will be reduced by half a letter grade (5 percentage points) for each day that it is late. Extensions will be granted on a case by case basis, without judgment. I encourage you to reach out if you anticipate failing to make a deadline, as it is best for both of us to know that in advance (and for you to get an extension).

Grading Scale

A+	98-100%	B	83-86%	C-	70-72%	F	59-0%
A	93-97%	B-	80-82%	D+	67-69%		
A-	90-92%	C+	77-79%	D	63-66%		
B+	87-89%	C	73-76%	D-	60-62%		

READINGS

Required Text

Karen L. Cox, *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021); eBook available via WVU Library.

Articles not linked below will be posted in full on eCampus.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1: Introductions

Thursday 8/21

Introductions

Week 2: Which Public? Whose History?

Tuesday 8/26

Readings:

The White House, "Executive Action: Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History." (March 27, 2025).

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/restoring-truth-and-sanity-to-american-history/>

The White House, "Letter to the Smithsonian: Internal Review of Smithsonian Exhibitions and Materials" (August 12, 2025).

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/08/letter-to-the-smithsonian-internal-review-of-smithsonian-exhibitions-and-materials/>

Due:

Student Profile

Participation Leads Assigned

Thursday 8/28

Readings:

Roger D. Lanius, "Public History Wars, the 'One Nation/One People' Consensus, and the Continuing Search for a Usable Past," *OAH Magazine of History* 27.1 (January 2013).

W.E.B. DuBois, "The Propaganda of History," *Black Reconstruction* (1935).

<https://abolitionnotes.org/web-dubois/propaganda-of-history>

Week 3: Historic Markers and Place Names

Tuesday 9/2

Readings:

Rosemary Hatheway, "Introduction," *Mountaineers Are Always Free: Heritage, Dissent, and a West Virginia Icon* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020). *Read in eBook available through WVU Library.*

Christopher P. Lehman, "Acknowledging Slavery's Ties to Minnesota's Public Universities through Historical Markers," *Rhetoric, Public Memory, and Campus History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022).

Dana Schultz, "New City of Women Map Assigns a Significant Female Figure to All 424 Subway Stations," *6sqft* (September 23, 2019).

<http://www.6sqft.com/new-city-of-women-map-assigns-a-significant-female-figure-to-all-424-subway-stations/>

Thursday 9/4

FIELD TRIP: Walking Tour of Downtown Campus

Week 4: The Problems With Monuments

Tuesday 9/9

Readings:

Karen Cox, *No Common Ground*, Introduction and Chapters 1-3

Thursday 9/11

Readings:

Karen Cox, *No Common Ground*, Chapters 4-6 and Epilogue

Week 5: The Potentials of Monuments

Tuesday 9/16

Readings:

Ronald Rudin, "The Hidden Life of Monuments: Reflections from the Lost Stories Project," *Journal of the History of the Atlantic Region* 49.1 (2019).

Philippine Village Historical Site

<https://www.philippinevillagehistoricalsite.com>

Listening:

Power & Public Space 7: "Mabel O. Wilson – Memorial to Enslaved Labourers, University of Virginia" (2022)

<https://drawingmatter.org/power-public-space-7-mabel-o-wilson-memorial-to-enslaved-labourers-university-of-virginia/>

Thursday 9/18

NO CLASS MEETING, Instructor Away

Week 6: Archives and Their Production

Tuesday 9/23

Reading:

Elizabeth Yale, "The History of Archives: The State of the Discipline," *Book History* 18 (2015).

Bryn Mawr College Library, "Confronting the Legacies of Colonialism and Racism in Special Collections" (Draft Document, 2021).

Thursday 9/25

Reading:

Dorothy Berry, "The House That Archives Built," *up//root* (June 2021).

Jimmy Zavala, Alda Allina Migoni, Michelle Caswell, Noah Geraci and Marika Cifor, "'A Process Where We're All at the Table': Community Archives Challenging Dominant modes of Archival Practice," *Archives and Manuscripts* 45.3 (2017).

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01576895.2017.1377088#d1e213>

Due:

Exam #1

Week 7: Archives and Oral History

Tuesday 9/30

FIELD TRIP: West Virginia and Regional History Center (Wise Library, 6th Floor)

Thursday 10/2

Readings:

David E. Kyvig, Myron A. Marty and Larry Cebula, "Producing Oral History Resources," *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

Kathleen M. Blee, "Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan," *The Journal of American History* 80.2 (1993).

Joanna Bornat, "Oral History and Remembering," *Research Methods for Memory Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

Week 8: Midpoint

Tuesday 10/7

Discussion of Final Projects

Due:

Research Paper

Thursday 10/9

NO CLASS MEETING, Fall Break

Week 9: Museums, Society and Power

Tuesday 10/14

NO CLASS MEETING, Instructor Away

Thursday 10/16

Guest: Jon Rubin, artist and founder of The National Museum

Readings:

Dan Hicks, "Chronopolitics," *The Brutish Museums* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

Alaka Wali and Robert Keith Collins, "Decolonizing Museums: Toward a Paradigm Shift," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 52 (2023).

<https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-anthro-052721-040652>

Mike Gonzalez, "The Smithsonian Institution Audit is Only the Start," *The Heritage Foundation* (June 17, 2025).

<https://www.heritage.org/budget-and-spending/commentary/the-smithsonian-institution-audit-only-the-start>

Website:

The Museum of Us, <https://museumofus.org/>

Saturday, 10/18

Optional Field Trip #1 – meet on site at 11:00AM

Arthurdale Heritage (<https://arthurdaleheritage.org>)

18 Q Road Arthurdale, WV 26520

Week 10: Grassroots Museums

Tuesday 10/21

Case Study: National Building Arts Center

Readings:

Eric Sandweiss, "Cities, Museums and City Museums," *Defining Memory* (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2007).

Elizabeth Blasius, "Urban Archaeology: Lost Buildings of St. Louis," *MAS Context* (January 22, 2024).

<https://mascontext.com/observations/urban-archaeology-lost-buildings-of-st-louis>

Thursday 10/23

Case Study: West Virginia Mine Wars Museum

Guest: Kenzie New Walker, Executive Director, West Virginia Mine Wars Museum

Readings:

Shaun Slifer, "Deep Time and Class Struggle in the Museum" and "In Matewan, A Museum From Below," *Museum From Below: Three Essays on Working As an Artist at the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum* (Matewan: West Virginia Mine Wars Museum, 2025).

Week 11: Museums and Audiences

Tuesday, 10/28

FIELD TRIP: West Virginia University Art Museum (Evansdale Campus)

Thursday, 10/30

Affect and the Personal

Readings:

Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan, "Introduction" and "Experience Markings," *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

Stacy Mann and Danny M. Cohen, "Crying at the Museum: A Call for Responsible Emotional Design," *Exhibition* (2017).

Week 12: Museums and Ethics

Tuesday, 11/4

Narrating Trauma

Readings:

Amy Sodaro, "Memorial Museums: The Emergence of a New Form," *Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

Omer Bartov, "The Truth and Nothing But: The Holocaust Gallery of the Warsaw POLIN Museum in Context," *New Directions in the History of the Jews in the Polish Lands* (Newton: Academic Studies Press, 2018)

Thursday, 11/6

Human Remains and Stolen Artifacts

Readings:

Katie Stringer Clary, "Human Remains in Museums Today," *History News* 73.4 (2018).

Chip Colwell, "Curating Secrets: Repatriation, Knowledge Flows, and Museum Power Structures," *Current Anthropology* 56, Supplement 12 (2015).

Saturday, 11/8

Optional Field Trip #2 – Meet on site at 1:00PM

Scott's Run Museum (<https://www.facebook.com/ScottsRunMuseum/>)
465 Scotts Run Road, Morgantown WV 26501

Week 13: Historic Preservation as Regulatory Practice

Tuesday 11/11

Reading:

William J. Murtagh, "The Preservation Movement and the Private Citizen Before World War II" and "Government and Preservation Since World War II," *Keeping Time: The History and Theory of Preservation in America* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2006).

National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)

<https://www.achp.gov/sites/default/files/2018-06/nhpa.pdf>

Thursday 11/13

Reading:

Stewart Brand, "Preservation: A Quiet, Populist, Conservative, Victorious Revolution" *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

Final Project Proposals Due

Week 14: Historic Preservation as Social Practice

Tuesday 11/11

Reading:

Shannon Lee Dawdy, "French Things," *Patina: A Profane Archaeology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

Thursday 11/13

TBD

Due:

Exam #2

Week 15: Fall Recess

Tuesday 11/25

NO CLASS MEETING: Fall Recess

Thursday 11/27

NO CLASS MEETING: Fall Recess

Week 16: Workshop

Tuesday, 12/2

Group Work

Thursday, 12/4

Group Work

Week 17: Conclusions

Tuesday, 12/9

Jobs In Public History Discussion

Danielle Petrak, Curator, Watts Museum at WVU

Melissa Bingmann, Director of Public History and Associate professor of History, WVU

Tom Kilionski, Project Manager, Mills Group Architects

Thursday, 12/11

Final Presentations