

Syllabus  
HIST 689  
Seminar in Public History  
Museums, Historians, and the Community

Dr. Kristin M. Szylvian  
4402 Friedmann  
Department of History  
Western Michigan University  
(616) 387-4643  
Office Hours: Wednesday, 4: 00 to 5:00 PM  
Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, 8:00 to 9:30 AM

Class time: Wednesday, 6:30 to 9:00 PM

Course Goal: The proposed Enola Gay exhibit at the National Museum of America History, the plans announced by the Disney Corporation to build a history theme park in Northern Virginia, and programs interpreting the lives of eighteenth century, African Americans held in slavery at Colonial Williamsburg provide three examples of public debates involving American History museums and sites. The purpose of this course is to examine the relationship between history museums in the United States, professionally trained historians who are employed in academe or public history, and local and regional communities. The following questions will be addressed: Do the history interpretations offered at most museums and historic sites reflect recent scholarship? Do the presentations of history at most museum and historic site reflect the values and beliefs of the local and regional community? How do history museums determine what they will research, collect, conserve, exhibit, and interpret? What methods are used to determine the messages the museum will communicate to the public? Are professionally trained historians involved in the process? Are the interested parties from the local community and region invited to participate in the process? How does the origin and background of a history museum influence its ability to work collaboratively with historians and interest groups? How can history museums work with academic and public historians and local interest groups to broaden the audience for historical interpretation? How do the efforts made by American history museums to work with indigenous people, and other ethnic and racial minorities and other underserved groups compare with museums abroad?

Course Description: The majority of the class meeting will be devoted to the discussion of recent scholarship in Museum Studies. These assigned readings will serve a starting place for a collaborative class research project. Pending budgetary approval, a field trip will be made to the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village where we can meet with staff members to discuss this institution's new research center and its potential for influencing the relationship between the museum, historians, and the community.

Evaluation: You are responsible for making yourself aware of and understanding WMU's code of Academic Integrity. Please see the [WMU Graduate Catalog](#) pp. 24-26 for further details. Your

course grade will be determined by the quality of the work you do on the collaborative research project. This project will focus on the following six institutions:

Gerald R- Ford Museum Grand Rapids  
Public Museum of Grand Rapids  
Henry Ford Museum/Greenfield Village, Dearborn  
Kalamazoo Valley Museum, Kalamazoo  
Northern Indiana Center for History, South Bend  
Museum of African American History, Detroit

Please select one of the above institutions and visit it. If you have selected a large museum or site, choose one or two exhibits upon which to concentrate. During your visit, search for indications or evidence that the museum might have worked in collaboration with 1) academic and public history scholars and 2) community organizations. A summary report is due on 9-12.

Compile a bibliography of published works and web sites focusing on the institution, its mission, and work with scholars and other collaborators. The bibliography is due on 9-26.

Schedule an interview with an appropriate staff member to discuss the museum's work with academic scholars and community organizations. Request copies of grant proposals, correspondence, reports, or other documents that shed light on the museum's relationship with academic scholars and community organizations. A transcription or summary report of the interview is due on 10- 10.

Write a paper analyzing the history of museums' work with academic scholars and community organizations. The first draft due on: 10/24 Note: Please provide each of your classmates with a copy of your paper.

Deadlines for the collaborative phases of the project will be announced once individual and team assignments are completed.

Reading Assignments: All reading assignments should be completed before class. Please inform me if you have not completed the reading.

9/5: Louwen, Lies Across America, to pp. 320

9/12: Louwen, Lies Across, America pp. 325-467.

9/22: field trip to Kalamazoo Valley Museum (specific time/date to be announced)

10/3: Mermaids, Mummies and Mastodons

10/10: Conn, Museums and American Intellectual Life

10/17: field trip to Henry Ford Museum/Greenfield Village (specific time/date to be announced)

10/24: Collecting Native America

11/7: West, Domesticating History

11/1 Representing the Nation to pp. 232

11/21: Representing the Nation to end

11/28: Archibald, A Place to Remember

Other readings and assignments will be made as appropriate. The instructor reserves the right to alter this syllabus as necessary.