

Keep state's vital history from completely fading away

By Robert Weible, Commentary

Albany Times, Published 5:24 pm, Wednesday, March 30, 2016

It's a tragedy whenever a person loses his or her memory. But it's considerably worse when a whole society falls victim to collective amnesia. This happens when dictatorships burn books, destroy cultural treasures, shut down educational institutions, and threaten (or worse) the lives of historians, journalists and scholars who keep memories alive.

In democratic societies, the crusade against public memory is less violent and bloody, of course, but it's insidious in its own way. Take New York state, for example. The state once led the nation in creating and supporting institutions that ensured the survival and use of historic documents, artifacts, buildings and sites. But during the fiscal crises of the 1970s and '80s, politicians justified crippling tax cuts by making cynical and unrealistic assurances that the private sector would disinterestedly maintain educational and other "nonessential" programs. Terms such as "fiscal responsibility" became euphemisms for radically redistributing public money to private sector "job creators" and making public and nonprofit institutions "do more with less."

Budget and staff reductions consequently hobbled the state's cultural organizations by forcing each of them to serve what was termed their "core mission." Libraries cut back on necessary acquisitions, for example, historic sites prioritized maintenance needs over education programs, and schools eliminated field trips. And now, volunteers and interns handle work once assigned to paid professional staff; part-time, poorly paid adjuncts teach university history courses; and as grant money gets targeted to for-profit tourism organizations rather than research and education programs, historic house museums and other small cultural organizations are simply closing their doors. Such trends have been occurring elsewhere, of course, but New York has also witnessed the dismantling of a unique network of historians that had long enabled both classroom and lifelong learners to become informed, more active citizens.

Progressive Era legislation had mandated the appointment of historians by all of New York's cities, towns, and villages (and later counties and boroughs). And generations of these public officials worked to raise historical awareness, improve the quality of life and encourage business investment in local communities. The historians were all appointed locally, but they looked to the state — and particularly to the state **Education Department** and the state historian — for support and direction.

But all that changed in the 1970s, when massive budget cuts eliminated the Office of State History, abolished the state historian's assistant commissioner position and reduced history staff by more than half. Remaining

positions were assigned to the State Archives or **State Museum**; state historian responsibilities were turned over to a curator in the State Museum.

The museum's "core mission" was focused on its collection and other internal matters in Albany, however, and it was never structured to lead a statewide network of historians, archivists, preservationists and educators. Local historians and others even had to lobby for appointment of a state historian after the museum allowed the job to wither away for seven years. Museum officials responded by appointing someone — me — as both state historian and chief curator of history. I was honored, but the museum's priorities hadn't really changed.

The bottom line here is that, without proper leadership, New York's entire history community has for decades been compromised in its ability to live up to its public service responsibilities.

Can the situation be reversed? Possibly. In 2011, the Board of Regents approved a plan to investigate the possibility of reinventing the Office of State History. Unfortunately, internal opposition has kept that from happening. And after my recent retirement, the museum even announced plans to downgrade — and further undermine — the state historian position. Not surprisingly, this idea has raised serious questions within the state's history community.

Still, there is reason for hope. Department leadership is now in the midst of significant change, and officials might consider seeking the advice of historians and educators outside the department.

Together, they could explore the (fundamentally budget-neutral) options here. They might want to upgrade the position and locate it in the office of the incoming deputy commissioner for cultural education, for example. Or possibly in the State Archives, which has a more focused historical orientation than the State Museum and is better structured to run a statewide program.

The only question is whether the State Education Department will choose to transcend its own bureaucracy and help perform the essential public service of keeping New York's historical memories vital and alive.

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