UNC Charlotte Department of History
Public History Thesis

The thesis in public history is intended to prepare students as scholars who can apply their knowledge in a public history setting. Students are earning a master’s degree in history with a public history concentration; therefore they must have a strong foundation in historical scholarship and the ability to make a practical application of their knowledge. Graduates should also have a strong grasp of how their scholarship, and their thesis project, fit into the literature of public history. The public history thesis, therefore, will consist of the following three parts: A brief review of literature, a scholarly essay and, finally, the project itself.

Thesis Committee and Proposal
You should form a thesis committee before you get to your final three hours of thesis work. First identify a member of the graduate faculty to serve as your thesis director. This person will guide you through the whole process of research and writing and should be someone who is familiar with the field of your topic and someone with whom you have good rapport. Your thesis director will help you choose the other two members of your committee. You’ll need to select a first reader, who will read and critique drafts of each chapter as they are written, and a second reader, who will read the completed thesis before the defense.

Under the direction of the thesis director, you will prepare a written thesis proposal of roughly 5-10 pages. Although the content of the proposals may vary, it should include a tentative thesis statement and a discussion of sources and it should situate the thesis topic in the historiography of public history. Each member of your committee will read your proposal and you will need to meet with each professor to discuss your project. Finally, all committee members must sign the Thesis Committee check-off sheet. These are located in the Department office. If the director of public history is not on your committee, you should make copies of all of your work for the director’s files.

The Public History thesis committee may include one public history professional and two graduate faculty members; however, three graduate faculty members must sign off on the final thesis.

Part I. Review of Literature (10-15 pages)
In addition to the seminar paper, the public history thesis must include a brief review of the public history literature most applicable to the student’s project. This review may appear before the scholarly essay, as it will explain how the project integrates the student’s knowledge of the literature as well as contributes to its growth.

Part II. Scholarly essay (25-35 pages)
Any thesis in the master’s program must be based on original research and should add to the literature on the topic. Graduates in public history must do the same. The primary difference is that the written portion of the public history thesis will be more brief, the length of a seminar paper, between 25 and 35 pages. This section will not only serve the purposes of the public history thesis, but would be an adequate writing sample should the student decide to pursue doctoral study. Finally, original scholarship is vital to the preparation of any historian, especially those who enter the field of public history.

Part III. Thesis Project
Students will develop a public history project in conjunction with a historical organization, where a professional staff member from the organization will mentor them. Students may develop a historic preservation project, an exhibit for a museum or historic site, or a website or online resource for an organization (though you are not limited to these choices). This project provides students with valuable experience in the practical application of scholarship, and prepares them to better serve the general public as they interpret that knowledge for a broad audience.