

History in Our Parks

Results from a National Survey of Practitioners



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Prepared by the AASLH “History in Our Parks” Task Force
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Executive Summary

Thousands of history practitioners work for public parks agencies. The field of history within parks agencies is extraordinarily diverse and runs the gamut from small, city-operated historic house museums to state and national parks. Recognizing the need to learn more about this significant subset of the field, AASLH worked with practitioners at state, county, and municipal parks agencies across the country, each with a range of responsibilities and areas expertise, to create the “History in Our Parks” task force in 2018. The first goal of this new task force was to conduct a survey to get a sense for the first time how historic sites are operated by parks agencies as well as the types of challenges those working within such agencies might face. 265 individuals from a variety of institution types responded to the survey in winter 2020.

Analysis of this survey reveals that **there is no “typical” history organization within parks agencies.** Broadly speaking, responses show that on average history practitioners in parks agencies operate with a budget of less than \$500,000 and have 1-4 full-time employees and 1-10 part-time employees. These employees manage, on average, 1-4 staffed historic sites/museums, with a number of other sites left unstaffed.

The survey results did, however, reveal a clearer picture of the typical experiences and common challenges faced by individual history practitioners working within parks agencies. Many parks agency history practitioners reported feeling:

1. **Underfunded.** They struggle to meet their duties of being proper stewards to historic resources.
2. **Understaffed.** They wear multiple hats – many wearing seven or more!
3. **Under-appreciated.** Or, more to the point, not understood adequately by their parks and recreation colleagues.

The first two of these likely resonate with those who work at small museums or history organizations, underscoring another important takeaway of this survey: parks agencies by and large operate small museums and many of the challenges history practitioners in parks agencies face are those faced by small museum professionals more broadly. One key difference—and it’s the source of many issues—is that parks practitioners work for agencies whose mission often doesn’t include the preservation and interpretation of historic resources. This results in leadership and coworkers who either don’t understand or don’t care about the work of history or its practitioners. Sometimes it’s both.

The survey responses revealed several important next steps for the task force. In particular, there’s a need for community support for history practitioners working for parks agencies. Moving forward, the task force hopes to develop ways to bring this community of history practitioners together so they can share their success stories and strategies to overcome their challenges. Additionally, the task force will work to communicate these needs and opportunities to the wider parks and recreation field through engagement with professional organizations like the National Recreation and Park Association and university departments that train the next generation of parks and rec professionals. This two-pronged approach will assist the history practitioners of today while also paving the way for a more secure future.

History in Our Parks National Survey Results

The field of history within parks agencies is extraordinarily diverse and runs the gamut from small city-operated historic house museums to state and national parks. In the 2020 National Visitation Survey, AASLH discovered that 27 percent of respondents worked for institutions that were part of a parks agency. Based on AASLH's estimate of 21,000 history organizations nationwide, there might be 5,000 to 6,000 history organizations embedded within parks agencies—though the nature of public agency data and differences from state to state make it difficult to determine with precision. Undoubtedly, thousands of history practitioners find themselves working in these agencies.

Recognizing the need to learn more about this significant subset of the industry, AASLH worked with practitioners at state, county, and municipal parks agencies across the country, each with a range of responsibilities and areas of expertise, to create the “History in Our Parks” Task Force in 2018. The purpose of the task force was twofold: first, to conduct a survey of the field to understand its scope and major challenges; and second, to serve as a source of community, support, and networking for history practitioners in parks agencies. This survey serves to accomplish the first part of the task force's mission.

To try to grasp in single survey the full spectrum of challenges and opportunities inherent in such a field is impossible. Nevertheless, the results of this first national survey of history within parks agencies has been able to paint in broad strokes the unique character of the field and the challenges history practitioners within it face. The goals of this survey were to get a sense for how historical sites are operated by parks agencies as well as the types of challenges encountered by those working within such agencies. The survey was therefore organized to ask questions at the macro level to learn how agencies operate historic sites and museums, and at the micro level, to learn how the practitioners themselves experience their work.

265 individuals from a variety of institution types responded to the survey in winter 2020.

“Doing history in a park district means I feel like a fish out of water and sometimes the lowest priority when it comes to the budget and maintenance. My coworkers either don't understand my job or don't care because it isn't recreation or nature.”

– *History in Our Parks Survey Respondent*

What Does the Typical Park Agency History Organization Look Like?

Parent Organizations

About three quarters of respondents reported that their organization was part of a city, county, or state parks agency, with other respondents spread across a range of other parent organizations.

Parent Organization Types		
County Parks and Recreation	68	26%
City Parks and Recreation	65	25%
State Parks and Recreation	53	20%
Other	34	13%
Private Nonprofit	17	6%
Regional Parks and Recreation	8	3%
Public or Special Service District	8	3%
Private Nonprofit (w/ Parks Department Parent Agency)	7	3%
Township Parks and Recreation	4	2%

Budgets

The budgets of historic sites and museums operating within parks agencies represented a wide range. About 15 percent reported budgets under \$50,000 per year and 24 percent reported budgets between \$51,000 and \$250,000; AASLH estimates that about three-quarters of U.S. history organizations have budgets under \$250,000 per year. Though on its surface that would suggest historical entities within parks agencies operate with larger budgets than their non-park counterparts, it's complicated by the fact that so many respondents were unable to report budget information: when combined, 32 percent of respondents selected "N/A" or "Not sure" for their budget size, making it the largest budget category. The frequency of these responses makes clear the difficulty inherent in assessing budget size for entities embedded within larger public agencies, both for people working within them and researchers working outside them. While some respondents had clearly distinguishable budgets, many others were unable to separate history work from their broader agency's budget.

Budget Sizes		
Under \$50,000	38	15%
\$51,000-\$250,000	63	24%
\$251,000-\$500,000	28	11%
\$501,000-\$1 million	17	6%
More than \$1 million	30	11%
N/A	27	10%
Not sure	59	23%

Staffing

About half of respondents indicated they had 1-4 full-time employees dedicated to history-related activities in their agency. Among those with 11 or more full-time employees, the majority worked for state park agencies. Significantly, about 75 percent of respondents also indicated that they employ part-time staff in some capacity as well.

Number of Full-Time History Staff		
1-4	116	44%
5-10	39	15%
11+	56	21%
N/A or Unknown	53	20%

Number of Part-Time History Staff		
1-4	101	38%
5-10	35	13%
11+	62	23%
N/A or Unknown	64	24%

Staffed and Unstaffed Sites

The task force wanted to understand how historic sites were operated within parks agencies. Specifically, we wanted to determine how many sites parks agencies were able to devote staffing resources to and how many remained unstaffed. Significantly, a majority of respondents indicated that their agency had at least one site that was unstaffed. Looking at these two questions together, more than one third of respondents indicated that their agency operated 1-4 staffed sites and 1-10 unstaffed sites. The vast majority of respondents who indicated more than 11 staffed or unstaffed sites worked for state parks agencies.

Number of Staffed Historic Sites/Museums/Archaeological Sites		
1	60	23%
2-4	84	32%
5-10	26	10%
11+	58	22%
N/A or Unknown	34	13%

Number of Unstaffed Historic Sites/Museums/Archaeological Sites		
1-5	99	37%
6-10	35	13%
11+	33	12%
N/A or Unknown	96	36%

What Does the “Typical” Agency Look Like?

Based on the results of our survey, the task force found that there is no “typical” history organization within parks agencies. If painting broadly, we can say that on average history practitioners in parks agencies operate with a budget of less than \$500,000 and have 1-4 full-

time employees and 1-10 part-time employees. And we can say that these employees manage 1-4 staffed historic sites/museums, as well as a number of unstaffed sites.

What are the Experiences of History Practitioners in Parks?

Areas of Responsibility

In the survey, the task force asked respondents to select all that applied from a list of seven possible areas of responsibility. Among our respondents, 77 percent reported they had Management/Administrative duties and 75 percent indicated they had Education/Interpretation duties. About 60 percent reported they were responsible for Cultural Resources/Preservation management. Between 40 and 50 percent of respondents selected each of the other duties, with 22 percent reporting additional duties as well. The most common pair of duties was Management and Interpretation, with over half of respondents indicating those two duties applied to their work. This likely indicates the prevalence of “Interpreter” positions within parks agencies, whose responsibilities include administrative and interpretive tasks, among many others.

Which duties are applicable to your job?		
Management/Administrative	204	77%
Education/Interpretation	199	75%
Cultural Resources/Preservation Management	159	60%
Collections Management	131	49%
Development	128	48%
Maintenance/Grounds/Housekeeping	116	44%
Curatorial	111	42%
Other	59	22%

“One of the needs I have noted in our parks system is ... with our century old historic parks, which are not necessarily thought of or treated as historic sites, but which have significant historic structures in them such as stone bridges, monuments, landscapes, etc.”

Number of Duties

As the percentages above indicate, most respondents reported responsibility for multiple duties as part of their role. On average respondents reported they were responsible for at least

four of those duties; 20 percent reported having just one of those duties, while 20 percent reported they were responsible for all seven, making them tied for the most frequent responses. **This wide range of duties is suggestive of one of the broader takeaways from this survey, which is that staff at historical entities within parks agencies are spread thin and responsible for a wide range of responsibilities.**

How many duties?		
1 Duty	51	20%
2 Duties	33	13%
3 Duties	31	12%
4 Duties	30	11%
5 Duties	30	11%
6 Duties	34	13%
7 Duties	52	20%

Challenges

Respondents were asked to rank on a scale of 1 (least challenging) to 5 (most challenging) how they would rate a list of various institutional challenges. They reported that *Staffing* and *Fundraising* were their biggest challenges, with a range of other challenges clustered in the middle, along with *visitation*, *governance*, and *inter-agency relationships* as the least challenging. These rankings were nearly identical for respondents with a range of different duties. *Assessment* ranked as slightly more challenging among educators and interpreters, and budgeting slightly less challenging among those with curatorial duties, but overall the ranking of various challenges was stable among respondents with different areas of responsibility.

What are your biggest challenges?	
Challenge	Weighted Average
Staffing	3.4
Fundraising	3.33
Stewardship (collections, structures, land)	3.16
Marketing/Branding	3.07
Budgeting	3.06
Assessment and Planning	3.05
Other	2.98
Visitation	2.69
Governance/Board Structure	2.62
Inter-agency Relationships	2.49

“One of our challenges is intra-agency cooperation, that is, helping our internal divisions all understand the significance of the historic sites and assets we manage.”

What is the “typical” experience of history practitioners in parks agencies?

The task force found that responses from our parks colleagues across the country revealed a number of common challenges. Task force members and respondents report feeling:

1. Underfunded. We struggle to meet our duties of being proper stewards to our resources.
2. Understaffed. We wear multiple hats – many of us seven or more!
3. Under-appreciated. Or, more to the point, not understood adequately by our parks and recreation colleagues.

The first two of these likely resonate with those who work at small museums or history organizations, underscoring another important takeaway of this survey: the museums that parks agencies operate are, by and large, quite small, and many of the challenges history practitioners in parks agencies face are those faced by small museum professionals more broadly. One key difference—and it’s the source of many issues—is that history practitioners within parks typically work for agencies whose mission often doesn’t include the preservation and interpretation of historic resources. This results in leadership and coworkers who either don’t understand or don’t care about the work of history or its practitioners. Sometimes it’s both.

Takeaways and Next Steps

This survey represents the first effort to analyze on a national scale the unique ways history is practiced in local/regional parks agencies and the challenges those practitioners face. What the task force discovered is that, in terms of staffing levels and types of challenges faced by practitioners, the museums and historic sites operated by local and regional park agencies in the United States are small. Staff are expected to manage more historic sites than they have resources for, and each staff member is expected to wear multiple hats. Many of the intra-agency (i.e., internal) challenges history practitioners face stem from the fact that they work for organizations unfamiliar with the preservation and interpretation of historic resources. Sometimes, it feels as if leadership simply doesn’t care about history at their park.

This survey was very much a first step, and because the task force needed to paint a broad picture to start, in some ways it obscures as much as it reveals. Questions remain to be answered: what exactly is the amount of money budgeted specifically to historic resources and interpretation in park agencies? What is the nature of the understaffed historic sites—are they

archaeological sites only, or historic sites and museums too? What role do leaders of these agencies see their historic resources playing in their overall mission? Additional research will be needed to answer these questions.

But the survey responses revealed several other important next steps for the task force. In particular, there's a need for a support community for history practitioners working for parks agencies. They frequently work in small teams to begin with and the intra-agency challenges they face from their own management underscore their feeling of isolation. Moving forward, the task force hopes to develop ways to bring this community of historians together so they can share their success stories and strategies to overcome their challenges. Additionally, the task force will work to communicate these needs and opportunities to the wider parks and recreation field through engagement with professional organizations like the National Recreation and Park Association and university departments that train the next generation of parks and rec professionals. This two-pronged approach will assist history practitioners of today while also paving the way for a more secure future.