

Becoming a Historian

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When did you know you wanted to become a historian? I'm not speaking of when you first realized you had a passion for history, but when you said to yourself, "This is what I want to do with my life." Perhaps you aren't there yet, even though you are pursuing a graduate degree. Here's what I knew about myself while I was working on my Master's degree: I had a passion for history. Here's what I remember telling myself after finishing my Ph.D.: I have trained to be a historian and that's what I'm going to do—job market be damned.

Becoming a historian is a process. Maybe it begins as a passion, but then you decide to pursue a Master's degree. Not satisfied with that, you pursue the Ph.D. And then you come face to face with the unforgiving academic job market, which can demoralize even those with the most confidence and a degree from a top-tier institution. Yet most of you are not attending top-tier institutions, and those of you who are will discover that it takes more than a degree from the Ivy League and a star adviser to break into academia to become the historian you dreamed of being. Having neither the fancy degree nor the famous mentor means you need other assets to become a historian—personality, drive, and options.

Those of you who are on the job market, take note: you are one of many qualified individuals who apply for jobs. Having served on a search committee, I know this very well. One dozen of you will be invited to an AHA interview for one job, and then three of you will get the campus interview. Only one of you will get the job out of the original pool of, on average, 200 applicants. By the time you get to campus you have already been vetted for your scholarship and training. It is now time to show your potential future colleagues who YOU are, because the reality in many cases is that many departments are looking for a good colleague. This is the point at which your personality comes into play, and you want to put your best foot forward. You don't want to let slip your stereotypical impressions of the region in which the university is located; you don't want to be a blowhard about your academic credentials (you are not alone in having them). You do want to come prepared—know as much as you can about the university and the faculty you hope to join by pretending as if you were starring in your own version of *The Return of Martin Guerre*. Finally, you need a good response to the question, "Why do you want to work here?" You need to think beyond the simple answer of "I need a job."

Becoming a historian also requires a lot of drive if you hope to become an academic. Since I did not attend a first-tier institution, I knew that I had to bring more to the table than my sterling degree. To those of you who are attending 2nd- and 3rd-tier institutions you can set yourself apart by being actively involved in the profession. Present papers, get published (a book review is better than nothing), join the appropriate professional organizations, and attend conferences even if you aren't on the program. You might also let your presence (and research) be known by participating in online discussions through

appropriate listservs. All of these activities help you build your professional network, may gain you letters of reference from scholars not affiliated with your degree-granting institution, and you will also make friends in the field, which is not to be underestimated as they can help you in your job search as well. All this being said, you must rid yourself of any notion that you are in a competition. Getting an academic job is a crap shoot. Certainly you must be qualified, but after that when you send in an application you need to let it go, and let what happens to it happen. Your application may not make it past a first round with a search committee, and it will have less to do with you and likely more with the inner workings of the committee. Know that you are qualified, brush yourself off, and move forward.

Finally, you need to have options. When I committed to a Ph.D. in history, I also committed to becoming a historian no matter what that might look like. When a position in academia was not forthcoming, I looked elsewhere. You need to be open to options if you want to become a historian. Those options could include working in government, working as a historian for a company, working in the non-profit sector in history education, working for a company that does historical research and writing for business and legal purposes, or becoming a working historian in a museum or for a preservation firm. All of these fall under the category we call *public history* and are places you should consider before throwing in the towel as far as your passion goes. I worked in a variety of jobs that were in the realm of public history and was still able to return to academia—directing a public history program AND getting to teach the courses I had hoped to teach when I graduated with my Ph.D.

The upshot of becoming a historian, especially one who also wants an academic job is this: maintain your ties to history and become a historian in a different setting if need be. You can continue to test the waters of the academic job market, but do not deny yourself the opportunity to do what you love to do. Paraphrasing a line from one of my favorite films, *Crossing Delancey*, "Try on a different hat; you might find you like it."

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