

Michelle McClellan, Ph.D.  
Department of History  
University of Michigan

## **“History at Work”**

INITIAL PROPOSAL, NOVEMBER 2007

### Brief Overview

**“History at Work: Remembering the New Deal in Michigan.”** Timed to correspond with the seventy-fifth anniversary of the New Deal in 2008, this course will offer students an opportunity to learn about the New Deal in Michigan, debate issues of historical commemoration and preservation, and collaborate with the Department of Natural Resources, the State Historic Preservation Office, and the Michigan Historic Preservation Network in shaping a preservation plan for historic structures built in the Waterloo State Recreation Area. The “History at Work” course model is intended to be an ongoing project, with courses on locally relevant topics in public history, and thus having the potential to engage new local partners each year.

### Background and Description of Project

The New Deal looms large in our political culture, shaping debates about the appropriate scope of the federal government even today. Yet, just as those who lived through the Great Depression are passing away, so the physical legacies of the New Deal in the landscape and built environment are often deteriorating. The Waterloo State Recreation Area includes a number of historic structures built during the New Deal, including Mill Lake Outdoor Center, one of the most intact complexes from this era. Outdoor Centers like Mill Lake served multiple purposes—their construction provided employment for young men during the Depression, and they were meant to offer an antidote to the perils and stresses of city life for urban youth and families. An

important cultural resource that is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, Mill Lake Outdoor Center has unfortunately remained vacant during the last several years and risks further deterioration. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has been seeking opportunities to rejuvenate this complex by physically restoring it and reviving programs and activities there, and has recently enlisted the help of a major foundation to do so. As it embarks on this endeavor, the DNR would like to develop accurate information about the design and construction of the buildings; about the original goals and programming of Outdoor Centers like Mill Lake; and about the workers who built the structures and the early campers themselves. The timing is ideal: through their research, students in “History at Work” can provide the data that the DNR needs in order to retain the integrity of the historic structures through the restoration process and to (re)create memorable programming that will help realize the DNR’s goal of connecting children and families with the natural environment. The DNR has agreed to provide access to the site and to the documentary materials in its possession about Waterloo and staff time and expertise to guide student research.

Another partner in “History at Work” is the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) in Lansing. With the DNR, the SHPO conducted an initial survey of the cultural resources in state parks in southeastern lower Michigan in 1996, but the two agencies were unable to pursue more intensive study (due to lack of funding). Research by the students in the course will provide the next step in documenting and preserving these structures, serving as the foundation for a National Register nomination for the Mill Lake Outdoor Center. This work has important implications for the Waterloo Recreation Area and will further the SHPO’s goals of documenting twentieth-century historic resources in the state of Michigan. Indeed, the SHPO has recently launched a New Deal Anniversary Project to identify, photograph, and gather

information about construction projects carried out under New Deal auspices throughout the state. Student research from “History at Work” will add to this effort. The SHPO has also agreed to contribute staff time, expertise, and technical assistance, as well as access to the materials it has compiled about Waterloo.

Finally, the Michigan Historic Preservation Network (MHPN) has also offered to support the project. The course furthers the MHPN’s educational mission by encouraging undergraduates to become involved in the field of preservation. In addition, as a state-wide organization, the MHPN can help create and nurture new partnerships as the “History at Work” model is used at other sites in future years.

For the History Department and for the university as a whole, this course offers a new curricular template focused on the area of public history, with the potential to engage wider audiences, expose students to other ways of doing history outside the classroom, and connect with other partners and constituencies at the university and throughout southeast Michigan. Although this first incarnation is an undergraduate topics course, the model could easily contribute a public history dimension to the graduate curriculum in the History Department and also in Museum Studies.

In both my teaching and scholarship, I have become increasingly fascinated by the complex intersections among place, memory, and history, especially as these intersections become manifest in heritage tourism and representations of rural life. The Waterloo State Recreation Area, particularly its origin story, provides a rich subject for examining these questions. The land that is now the Waterloo State Recreation Area was once home to dozens of farming families (and identifying these families is a research goal for the course). Since many of these farmers were unable to pay their taxes, the state gradually acquired the land, then

repackaged the landscape as a “natural” setting for urban families to enjoy. Building on the research that is produced through “History at Work,” I will write an article analyzing the ways in which the creation of Waterloo was influenced by idealized notions of rural life, even as its development accelerated the removal of agricultural families from the area and erased their stories from a celebratory narrative of conservation and stewardship. As preservationists and environmentalists increasingly work together to protect both cultural and natural resources, understanding the origins of a place like Waterloo can help make that cooperation as productive as possible while remaining sensitive to the impact of these efforts on rural communities.

#### REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE, JANUARY 2009

Looking back on the course now, I consider it a very rewarding and successful experience, with some challenges along the way. I offer here a few reflections on what I learned from teaching the course the first time.

##### Motivations: Personal, Professional, and Pedagogical

I wanted to do this project to bridge some dislocations in my own work and professional identity. Over the last decade, I’ve been doing lots of public history work with local history museums, historical societies, and in community preservation. All of these efforts felt somehow “on the side,” very rewarding but not integrated into my professional identity. I found that I did not talk about these activities on campus, for a variety of reasons. My particular position at this university—as a lecturer, not tenure-track faculty—has also shaped my desire and ability to do this work in some paradoxical ways. On the one hand, my relatively marginal position has forced me to articulate, to myself at least, why I care about history, and to find creative ways to “do history” outside the academy. Moreover, the fact that my classes are often added late (depending in part on the sabbatical plans of regular faculty) has actually allowed me more flexibility in creating new courses. On the other hand, even as a lecturer I am not immune from the general academic culture that requires a particular kind of scholarship for advancement. I feared that even sympathetic mentors would advise me that public history is not rigorous enough and would take time away from my “real” scholarship. As a lecturer, in some ways I felt especially vulnerable that anything that looks unusual or quirky might mark me even more as a second-class academic historian.

In addition to integrating various aspects of my career, I wanted to bridge another kind of disconnect in my own identity. I grew up in rural Michigan. Back then, although I knew I would go to college, I viewed the University of Michigan and even the town of Ann Arbor as a world apart. I lived in other regions of the country during college, graduate school, and my first years of teaching. Now, I’m back **in** Michigan, in fact **at** Michigan, and I have the opportunity

to see the other side of the equation. I have encountered colleagues and students who never leave Ann Arbor and who can be dismissive of the rest of the state. No doubt, I may well have harbored similar attitudes myself at other institutions. Now, however, I react to such views personally because of Michigan's place in my own past. As a result, it has been very meaningful for me to try to bring together through public history projects the academic world of Ann Arbor and the rest of the state, including the rural parts of it.

All these reasons, some better articulated than others, urged me toward the creation of a public history course that would get the students out of the classroom. The idea for this specific project was sparked by a conversation I had at the annual conference of the Michigan Historic Preservation Conference, a statewide, non-profit preservation organization with which I have been involved as a volunteer. At this meeting, I learned from a preservation professional from the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) about New Deal-era structures in Michigan that need attention, including some in the Waterloo State Recreation Area, which is near where I live. This SHPO staff member put me in touch with the Department of Natural Resources. All three organizations—the non-profit preservation group and the two state agencies—became partners in the project.

Focusing on the New Deal era seemed to me to be a rich topic for teaching history, a promising subject for encouraging students to feel a connection to the past. The New Deal legacy is all around us in both landscape and politics, and in my view it deserves a more self-conscious examination. The Waterloo State Recreation Area itself had been created during the New Deal, and it serves as an example of a social vision enacted on the landscape: it was a public works project to put unemployed young men to work and a way to expose city children to wholesome outdoor recreation (even as many of the agricultural families who lived there had left the land). For all of these reasons, the site itself promised much potential for teaching about the political, social, and cultural history of the New Deal era. Further, the timing seemed ideal, as part of the larger commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the New Deal. More specifically, the DNR had a potential funder to help sponsor the renovation of one camp complex at Waterloo, the Mill Lake Outdoor Center. Our class could help inform the restoration process through our research.

### Teaching the Course Itself

The course thus took shape as “History at Work: Remembering the New Deal in Michigan.” Initially I thought that we would be swinging hammers by the end of the semester—that is, engaged in hands-on preservation work. That didn't happen. Instead, we spent the first few weeks of the semester reading about preservation theory and practice, the New Deal and its public works programs, and outdoor recreation during the early decades of the twentieth century. We also had several field visits, to the Bentley Historical Library on the campus of the University of Michigan (to learn about research using primary source materials) and to Mill Lake itself. During our group visit to Mill Lake, we were guided by staff members from the DNR and the SHPO.

For the second part of the semester, the class focused on a series of research projects. The students divided into teams, examining various aspects of the history of the Mill Lake Outdoor Center. Two groups worked on identifying families who had lived in the area and uncovering local reaction to the park's creation, while another sought to find workers who had

built the complex, and the final group searched for evidence of what early campers might have experienced at Mill Lake.

As I planned and taught this class, which was a new kind of endeavor for me, I ran into some blind spots and mistakes. Understanding and grappling with those became some of the most rewarding aspects of the course.

One of the most basic elements of the class was the simple matter of geography. The Waterloo State Recreation Area is not far from Ann Arbor, about 20 miles, but most of the students had never heard of it. This, despite the fact that Waterloo is the largest state park in the lower peninsula of Michigan (over 20,000 acres) and most of the students were from Michigan. Of course, the students self-selected for taking this course, and they were therefore presumably open to the idea of field visits. Yet the planning and execution of the field visits required more time than I had anticipated, and I also found that the few students who expressed negative attitudes about the time commitment or who failed to show up for field work had more of an impact that they might have in a typical classroom situation.

Despite these problems, the students reacted **very** positively to the field visits and to the simple fact that they got out of the classroom. This response seems obvious in retrospect—indeed, this is exactly why I structured the class in this way—but I was not prepared for the intensity of their response. I had the students write a short reflective essay on the experience of seeing the historic structures and walking the grounds of the Mill Lake Outdoor Center. Many of the students used the same phrase, that being there “made it come alive.” I found this reaction especially striking since there were no people there except for our tour guides from the DNR and the SHPO. We had been reading and talking about the farming families who had lived there, the young men who built the structures during the New Deal Era, and the campers who came to the camp decades ago. Much of our discussion of all of these people relied on imagination, and of course none of them were actually at Mill Lake during our visit. Yet the students were remarkably consistent in their use of that phrase. The landscape itself was so evocative that it almost seemed to conjure the people who had contributed to the stories of the place. Seeing this response among the students made me all the more convinced of the importance of **place** in how people understand history, and strengthened my resolve to incorporate that element into my scholarship and teaching.

Just as place played a role in shaping the students’ understanding of the historical developments that shaped Waterloo, so too is **time** a fundamental element influencing their appreciation of the past. This park and these structures were built almost three quarters of a century ago. To students born in the 1980s, the New Deal era can look ancient history. In some cases, “exotic” qualities of the past can help history teachers capture the attention of students. Students sometimes dismiss twentieth-century American history, however, as vaguely familiar (and thus not that interesting) yet remote enough to be irrelevant. In this case, I was pleasantly surprised at the extent to which *age*—another dimension of time, of course—helped the students, especially the male students, to engage with the process of historical interpretation. In the classroom, we studied public works programs of the New Deal in Michigan and nationally, and we read memoirs by some men who had served in the Civilian Conservation Corps. Most men who participated in the CCC were about twenty years old—basically the same age as the students are now—and this fact encouraged the students to take that leap of empathy which is so important in the study of the past. For their projects, two students pursued oral history interviews with CCC alumni. As it turned out, none of the interview subjects had worked at the

Mill Lake Outdoor Center or any part of Waterloo. Here, I faced a disconnect between the pedagogical goals of the class and what I had hoped to accomplish in terms of research. That is, we were unable to find interview subjects who had worked at Waterloo, and so the oral histories did not contribute to our specific research plan. Yet the students were so motivated to do the interviews (one student even drove three hours to talk with his subject) that I was delighted with the outcome even though it did not contribute directly to our research goals regarding the Mill Lake complex itself.

### Real-World Collaboration

With a specialization in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American history, I usually study people who are deceased. I greatly appreciated the opportunity for oral history with people who had lived through the events we were studying. For me as for the students, this was an important reminder that the past is closer than we think, and that the intersections of past and present are often the most fascinating places. I also discovered anew that working with others to interpret the past and assign meaning in the present can be a rewarding, if sometimes messy, endeavor.

One of my goals in organizing this class was to expose students to careers in history beyond classroom teaching. To that end, I asked the professional staff from the DNR and the SHPO with whom we worked to speak to the students about their own career trajectories. Students told me afterward that this was one of the most useful elements of the course for them. The students also received an inadvertent lesson in political realities as we saw and heard firsthand the competing imperatives of the DNR and the SHPO. As we walked through the Mill Lake Outdoor Center, these staffers chatted with one another and with the class about the goals and constraints each of their agencies had regarding Mill Lake. In general, as one might expect, the SHPO privileged the historic structures while the DNR focused on the natural features of the area. Yet even those goals, consistent with the missions of the two state agencies, were not fixed but depended in part on the priorities of key personnel and on funding. The students and I found this discussion to be among the most informative aspects of our course, and it was completely unscripted! I learned from this experience that planning is important but so is serendipity, and as the instructor I need to be flexible enough to allow space for rich learning opportunities that present themselves as we go along.

It was easier for me to recognize the learning potential of this collaboration for students than it was to come to terms to what it meant for me. Forming this collaboration with state agencies also challenged some of my deeply-held assumptions about the extent to which intellectual work should be individual and autonomous. As I planned the class, I consulted with the DNR to find out what would help them, and shaped some aspects of the project accordingly. While I recognize all the reasons for doing this—that is the nature of collaboration, after all—it cut against much of my professional socialization. It was hard at times not to feel like a hired gun, that I was somehow compromising my scholarly integrity by consulting with *anyone* as I conceptualized a project. Somewhere along the way, I had absorbed the idea that the most worthwhile projects are solitary, conceived in isolation and removed from any real-world considerations. I had not realized how much I subscribed to this view until I found it challenged through this class.

And the truth is, if it were completely up to me, I might have chosen a different focus for this project, one more aligned with the SHPO's focus on the historic structures themselves as

fundamental resources in the park. But the reality is that the DNR is in charge of Waterloo State Recreation Area (and thus the Mill Lake Outdoor Center) and any restoration of the structures will be within the context of—and probably in service to—the DNR’s overall goals for the recreational use of the park. I have the opportunity to influence the plan for Mill Lake by emphasizing the importance of history and urging an historically informed restoration. In short, I can have a seat at their table or not be involved at all. And in fact, I have come to appreciate their openness to what I can contribute, realizing anew through the eyes of my community partners how valuable engaged history can be.

### Rethinking Scholarship

As I mentioned, the collaborative aspects of this project deeply challenged my assumptions that the best scholarship in history comes from a solitary researcher toiling away in isolation until ready to reveal polished findings to a passive audience (or at most, to a select circle of fellow specialists for evaluation). Other classes I have taught over the years have informed my scholarship, just as my research has shaped my courses, but these processes have operated through me as a single conduit, often following an extractive, rather than a truly collaborative or interactive, model. How can I structure my courses, I used to ask myself, so that the books I read and the planning I do will contribute to my scholarly productivity, which I still defined in a highly individualistic manner. History at Work has shown me, in contrast, that collaboration—particularly the conversations I have had along the way about the nature of historical interpretation and the value of historical scholarship—can lead to a different kind of productivity, one which is often even more creative and meaningful than the traditional model of scholarly output and which allows me as an historian to best realize the contribution I can make through my specialized skills and training.

I mentioned earlier that I was drawn to this project because of my increasing interest in memory and place in the study of history. More specifically, still following an extractive model, I expected to glean certain insights regarding how we “read” rural landscapes through the class that I could then apply to another research project I am doing on heritage tourism. I found, however, that the process of working through an interpretation of Waterloo with the students, partly through the act of literally walking the grounds of the Mill Lake Outdoor Center with them, profoundly altered my understanding of the power of place to shape our narratives of both the past and the present. The landscape of the Mill Lake Outdoor Center today has been re-naturalized. The Waterloo State Recreation Area, like other New Deal-era recreation areas and state parks, was created as an idealized representation of rural life, offered as a wholesome alternative to city problems for urban children and families. The people who had lived and farmed there became invisible as the land was transformed—through the hard work of New Deal landscape architects, planners, and laborers—from an agricultural to a “natural” setting. The origin story of the park came to emphasize not the agricultural history of the region but instead the importance of conservation and stewardship of the “natural” world. Today, looking at the landscape, a visitor would never know that these farming families had ever been there.

Because of its elegance, its resonance with what I tend to believe about American social history, and most of all, because of the evocative power of the landscape of Waterloo itself today, I was seduced by this argument focusing on the erasure of the former residents from the landscape and the story of the park. I then made the fundamental mistake of reading it backward into the time that the park was created, imagining that the farming families who lived in the area



had been forcibly removed, practically deported, to make way for the park. Along with at least some of the students, I constructed a simplified storyline about heroes and villains, a coercive government imposing its will on humble rural folk. But the real story, of course, is much more complicated. The group of students who researched the founding of the park found, to their surprise, that many of the families had been just as happy to sell their land to the government and try to make a fresh start elsewhere. This was during the Great Depression, after all, and the chance to start anew with even the small stake they might have realized from selling their land was very appealing to some. We gathered more evidence for this alternative (to us) view of the park's creation from the audience who came to our presentation at a local public library. This presentation, the culmination of the course, was an immensely rewarding experience for the students, demonstrating to them that their research will have real-life application and showing them that we could learn from the audience as well as sharing our findings with them.

For me as well, working out an interpretation *with* the students and talking *with* an engaged public audience about our work was incredibly valuable. I am certain that I would have persisted in my biased and erroneous understanding of the creation of Waterloo far longer if I had not been involved in these collaborative relationships. Observing the intensity of the students' reaction to visiting the places where the events we were studying had actually occurred has given me a new appreciation of the importance of place as both a subject of historical inquiry and an interpretive tool in the study of the past. Our mutual excitement at "being there" provided an important reminder of the evocative power of place in fostering an imaginative connection with the past, which I believe is fundamental to the study of history. Yet this experience also revealed that precisely *because* place is so powerful in shaping our perceptions of the past, it requires a careful and rigorous analysis lest we be seduced, as I was, into a romanticized interpretation. Unpacking this complicated nexus of ideas, assumptions, and values inspired by the place itself *alongside of and in collaboration with* the students—and with the public audience, as well as our community partners—allowed, indeed required, me to see my own interpretative blinders much sooner than I might have had I been working alone. I will use these new insights to inform both an article I am writing on the historical landscapes of Waterloo and my research on heritage tourism at the "Little House" sites associated with Laura Ingalls Wilder. In the end, then, this teaching informs my scholarship as well, but in a much richer and probably more efficient way than I had experienced via the extractive model to which I adhered in the past.

As well as suggesting new interpretive approaches, History at Work has changed my understanding of what kinds of outcomes or products constitute historical scholarship. I have a new appreciation for the ways in which nuanced, thoughtful, and accessible historical analysis of a place like Mill Lake Outdoor Center can be used as a resource for those who are planning its present and future. A narrowly focused, in-depth monograph—which I have been trained to see as the height of scholarly achievement in my discipline—is not the best model here. Indeed, I believe now that I can make the most important contribution by telling the story of Waterloo—specifically, the story of Mill Lake Outdoor Center—and why it matters to the widest possible audience, including policy makers and the general public. Appreciating the historical reasons for the creation of Mill Lake helps justify its restoration and enriches immeasurably the experiences of those who will visit there in the future. Conducting research, writing reports for the government agencies involved in overseeing Mill Lake, speaking to the general public about the legacies of the New Deal, and contributing to interpretive signage at the site itself are all ways in which I can advocate for both the preservation of Mill Lake Outdoor Center and the importance

of history. Rethinking what “counts” as historical scholarship, defining myself anew as a truly public historian, I have been reminded of the passions and commitments that made me become an historian in the first place—a great gift indeed.