



New York State's Historians

New York is the only State requiring a public historian in every municipality. Other states typically rely on Historical Societies, history teachers, and independent historians to preserve their history and genealogical resources.

New York State Historian's Law 57.07

This law, adopted by the New York State Legislature in 1919, mandates that a historian be appointed for every municipality and defines your responsibilities. If you haven't read the law, take a few minutes to do so.

The New York State Historian's Law 57.07

http://www.archives.nysed.gov/records/mr_laws_acal5707.shtml

<http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/common/nysm/files/duties-functions-local-government-historians.pdf>

A public historian is an officer of the municipality who is appointed each year by the Supervisor or Mayor of the municipality.

After your appointment is announced, you need to sign the oath of office book, typically held by the Town Clerk.

You are required to serve all constituents of the municipality without regard to partisan politics.

New York State has:

- 61 City Historians
- 567 Village Historians
- 938 Town Historians
- 57 County Historians
- 5 Borough Historians
- 12 Community Historians (Manhattan)
- 1 State Historian

1641* Historians across the State

* This number changes as municipalities merge or are established.

Combining Multiple Positions

The job of municipal historian has clearly defined responsibilities that differ from those of a records management clerk or an elected town clerk.

In some municipalities one person is both Historian and Records Management Clerk. In others, one person fills the positions of Town Clerk and Historian.

While the law allows these combined positions, the responsibilities of each require different skills, education, and time constraints. You should carefully consider the responsibilities of each job before accepting a combined position.

Role of the Municipal Historian

A Brief Summary of the Four State-defined Responsibilities

1. **Research and Writing:**

The first, and primary, responsibility of the Local Government Historian is interpretation of the past. This involves research and writing on aspects of your muni for publishing in books, magazines, and newspapers.

From the law: "The best local historians have upheld high standards of gathering and evaluating evidence, making thoughtful and appropriate generalizations, writing well-organized and readable narratives, and sharing their work with others through the most appropriate mediums."

2. **Teaching and Public Presentations**

As historian, you may teach courses in local and regional history, serve as a resource to teachers in the fourth and seventh grade local history curriculum, serve as a content consultant, speak and lecture to community groups, and participate in radio and TV talk shows to disseminate local history.

3. **Historic Preservation**

Historians are advocates for historic preservation and a resource to your appointing authority on questions relating to history and preservation. The historian may be asked to prepare a cultural resource survey, identify historic structures and prepare nominations to the State and National Register of Historic Places and to develop and manage historic marker programs.

4. **Organization, Advocacy and Tourism Promotion**

Historians are asked to organize and direct the commemoration of historical anniversaries and to participate in other civic or patriotic observations. The historian may be asked to act as a fund raiser or grant writer for historical programs. Appointing authorities may ask you to support local tourism.

As the Historian you are NOT:

- ◆ An antiquarian—simply a collector of facts
- ◆ An archivist or Records Management Officer
- ◆ A genealogist for hire
- ◆ A part of a historical agency staff.

Role of the County and State Historian

County Historians

The N.Y. ARTS & CULT. AFF. LAW § 57.09 states:

“It shall be the duty of the county historian to supervise the activities of the local historians in towns and villages within the county in performing the historical work recommended by the state historian, and also to prepare and to present to the board of supervisors a report of the important occurrences within the county for each calendar year.”

The county historian performs essentially the same duties as the town historian but on a scale that includes all cities, townships, and villages within the county.

Additionally, each county historian is a resource for city, town and village historians.

State Historian

The State Historian, Devan Lander, posts the latest news about New York State history and his efforts to preserve our history on his site:

<http://www.nysm.nysed.gov/research-collections/state-history/notes/welcome-new-york-office-state-history-website>

A sampling of his comments from the site include:

“I will continue to work with organizations and individuals of all kinds with the main goal of elevating the study, practice, promotion and teaching of New York’s history. I will be attending gatherings of historians and partner groups whenever possible to learn and discuss ways to strengthen the historical enterprise across New York. I look forward to working with you all.”

“I will continue to assist State and local efforts related to the major anniversaries for Women’s Suffrage, World War I and the Erie Canal. Events, exhibits, and programs related to these anniversaries will be highlighted on the Office of State History website and I will be working with entities such as the NYS Women’s Suffrage Commission, the NYS World War I Centennial Commission, and the NYS Canal Corporation and Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor to highlight and promote their work throughout the year.”