

## The Full Story

When I entered grad school, I believed, as everyone who has worked in the museum world believes, that historians could do and be many things. But by the time I finished my first year of grad school, I believed that historians did only one thing: work as professors. Not becoming a professor would, I was sure, indicate that I was a failure.

In my last year of grad school, I applied for jobs everywhere and anywhere. Needless to say, and as every historian knows, the academic job market sucked/sucks (there is no other word for this).

Looking at the websites of many of the departments doing the hiring and comparing the ad to the department proved to be an exercise in frustration. Most departments seemed to cling to a strange belief that one's dissertation defined one's pedagogical abilities; an eighteenth-century historian could not, in other words, teach a course on the nineteenth-century. Even small departments looking for an historian who would teach primarily Western Civ, with perhaps one upper-division undergraduate class in British history, would often demand specific interests and specialties, none of which matched the courses or needs of the students the job candidate would be teaching.

My first year on the market my only offer was for a post-doctoral fellowship in the history of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, a graduate medical school (UCSF has no undergraduates in the traditional sense). I took the post-doc as that was my only option. Because I was so worried about the job market, I spent my post doc focused on getting a tenure-track job, not on exploring new ideas and new ways of thinking about history. When I was offered a job at Montana State University midway through the first year of my two year post-doc, I opted to take the job and leave the post-doc.

Even as I took the job, I had incredible doubts. Many, many people would love to live in Montana but I am not one of them. I grew up in the Northeast, in a *very* ethnically, religiously, and racially diverse community. Living in large and diverse cities has always been extremely important to me yet here I was heading off to a rural area not known for its diversity or even its proximity to other cities. I missed museums, theaters, public transportation, racial, religious, and ethnic diversity, hanging out with people who are not academics (college towns are generally company towns) etc.

I also had begun to question some aspects of what I was doing. While many graduate programs brag that they do a stellar job preparing their students for academic careers, very few really prepare you to think critically about what professors do, how they do it, why they do it, and where they do it.

As I struggled with the reality of teaching at a medium-sized flagship state university, my research also suffered. I now lived in a rural area, teaching at a relatively poor state university with a limited library (although one of the best in the state). Traveling to London and Edinburgh entailed a hellish long-haul flight and was extraordinarily

expensive. Living in a place where the culture and the focus is on the concept of the American West also made me feel very out of sync with my research.

Desperate, I began applying, again, for jobs, even visiting professorships. Of course, this approach is, as my upper-class eighteenth-century Britons would say, Just Not Done. Hiring committees, all of whom let me know in no uncertain terms that this would be career suicide, sharply questioned why I was considering this in job interviews.

Still I got an offer for a visiting position from a small state university in New York. Reputation-wise, it was a step down. But it was near my family, it was somewhat close to New York City (80 miles away), and I knew I could not stay where I was.

Going from a tenure-track position to a visiting one highlighted the rigid and very hierarchical system which puts tenured professors at the top and adjuncts at the bottom (even if the adjunct in question has out-published the tenured professor and won teaching awards). Add in academia's extraordinary lack of racial diversity and I began to wonder why I was working in an environment which did not reflect many of my core values and which had me living in places I did not like.

Midway through my two-year visiting professorship, a friend asked me the question my family had been asking for years: "Why don't you just leave academia?" Previously, I was so wrapped up in the idea of academic success that leaving academia was unthinkable. But now I was ready to leave.

### **Leaving Academia:**

Leaving academia was very difficult. I was single so I had no spouse to assist me as I made the shift. I was unemployed for eight months and I collected unemployment insurance during some of that time.

Because I was uncertain about what I wanted, I read a lot of career books. Despite my almost pathological shyness, I began to speak to people about my options, slowly building a non-academic network.

I was struck by how many people, working in many, many different places, shared my belief that history has meaning outside the classroom. In the eight months that I spent speaking to people in industries as varied as banking, health care, and public relations, I had more interesting---and challenging---conversations about the value of history than I had had in my many years in grad school and teaching.

Speaking to people about how to craft my resume and, more specifically, how to apply for federal jobs enabled me to apply, successfully, for a position with the federal government. One of the two offers I received entailed working as a public historian for the federal government. I chose that job because it seemed to offer the most diversity and because I was attracted to the idea of public service.

After working in the Office of the Public Health Service Historian for seven years (2001-2008), I decided it was time for a change. In January 2008, I became the Branch Chief of the National Historic Landmarks Program in the National Park Service. This job covers a broad swath of American history. One minute I am researching the whaling industry in the late eighteenth century; the next, I am writing about the development of the American aviation industry in the inter-war period. My new job also brings me in contact with people all over the US who love history; these are enthusiastic amateurs—lovers of history---in the best sense and I have been impressed by both their enthusiasm in preserving and protecting historical sites as well as their in-depth knowledge of history.