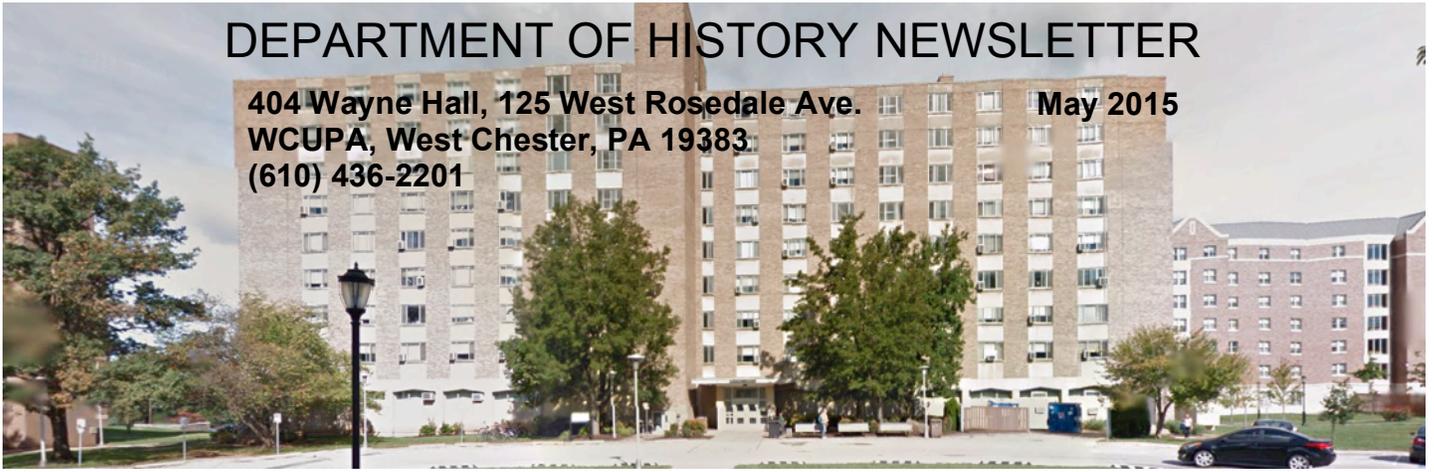


DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY NEWSLETTER

404 Wayne Hall, 125 West Rosedale Ave.
WCUA, West Chester, PA 19383
(610) 436-2201

May 2015



State of the Department

Greetings from the Department of History, which saw some transformations during academic year 2014-2015. We made an historic move in August 2014, relocating from our old home in Main Hall to Wayne Hall. Our new digs are on the fourth floor of this former residence hall, located kitty corner across from Sykes Student Union. Wayne Hall was apparently named after General “Mad Anthony” Wayne (1745-1796) of Revolutionary War fame. In the fourth floor’s West Wing you will find 13 faculty offices; in the East Wing you will find 8 faculty offices as well as the offices of the History chairperson and secretary, Mail Room, and Conference Room. Each faculty member now enjoys a single office (formerly a twin room with twin closets) with an expansive window. The Conference Room is reserved for meetings and our HIS 300 and HIS 400 sections, while on the ground floor are two classrooms seating 35 and 45 students. We enjoy a sense of community on a floor of our own, and look forward to neighbors when all floors of Wayne Hall fill in.

The Department also welcomed two new faculty members this academic year. Dr. Martha Donkor, whom our program shares (1/8 time) in a joint appointment with Women and Gender Studies (7/8 time), specializes in feminist pedagogy, race, ethnicity, immigration, and African history. She has published a monograph entitled Sudanese Refugees in the United States: The Collateral Damage of Sudan’s Civil War (2008) through Edwin Mellen Press. Dr. Elizabeth Urban, with a newly-minted doctorate degree from the University of Chicago, is our new specialist in the Islamic world. She has hit the ground running in her initial year here with a record of scholarship and highly effective teaching. See the personal biographies and photos of Dr. Donkor and Dr. Urban below.

Department chair Dr. Wayne Hanley has gone on a much-deserved sabbatical leave this Spring. He writes from Paris, France, that the libraries and archives have gone higher tech than the last time he researched there some years ago, and that his French is returning with each passing day, with or without the wine. We are doing the best we can to hold down the fort, and look forward to Dr. Hanley’s return in time for a new school year.

Other highlights--including faculty initiatives, student projects, our graduates’ transformative experiences living abroad, and an alumna’s reflections--appear at greater length in this Newsletter; please take the time to read what we have been up to. We continue to revamp the [department’s web page](#) to better serve current, prospective, and past students as well as any interested in learning about our program. We urge our graduates to complete the Alumni Survey by clicking [Alumni Survey](#) or visiting the History website—your information will help us as we continue to work on program design and recruitment. Please keep in touch, and let us know what you’ve been doing!



Cecilia Chien

Acting Department Chair

New Faculty: Dr. Martha Donkor

Dr. Martha Donkor was jointly appointed to History and Women and Gender Studies in Fall 2014, having taught in one of our sister schools, Edinboro University, for twelve years. Dr. Donkor was born in Ghana, studied in Canada and has been



living in the US since 2002. She says that living in three different countries has given her an internationalist perspective in her teaching and research. Shortly after joining the department, she applied for CASSDA funds to continue research she began on the role of cultural associations in shaping the “Ghanaian ethnic” identity in Canada. Although that project was not funded, she intends to resubmit it in order to complete what she considers to be an essential aspect of the study of the Ghanaian immigrant community in Canada. On a more positive note, Dr. Donkor applied for and obtained a \$10,000 funding from the WCU Foundation to study child rape in Ghana. She has already hired a WGS major as research assistant to retrieve newspaper stories on rape in Ghana. Dr. Donkor is traveling to



Ghana this summer to start work on the first phase of the research project. To set the tone for the project, Dr. Donkor has submitted an abstract to the Mid-Atlantic Popular Conference for consideration for presentation on the topic, “They Said What? Internet responses to rape stories in Ghana.”

New Faculty: Dr. Elizabeth Urban

Elizabeth Urban joined the WCUPA history faculty in Fall 2014. Before coming to West Chester, she held a Mellon postdoctoral fellowship at Williams College and a visiting assistant professorship at Brandeis University. She got her B.A. in Religious Studies from Rice University in 2004, and she went on to get her M.A. (2006) and Ph.D. (2012) in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from the University of Chicago. Dr. Urban researches the earliest Islamic community in the 7th–8th centuries. She is particularly interested in how people joined this new community and how



they articulated their identities as Muslims. She has recently submitted chapters on the role of slave mothers in early Islamic society, and on the role of freed slaves as scribes in the early Islamic state. She also teaches a range of courses on the Islamic world, spanning the medieval and modern periods. Dr. Urban traveled to Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia in the mid-2000's, and she



hopes to travel to the Arab world again when the political situation stabilizes. In the meantime, she is happy to speak her stilted Classical Arabic and sound like a throwback to the 8th century. Finally, as a native Texan, Prof. Urban has been known to use the word "y'all," make killer guacamole, and have way too many pictures of cattle on her computer.

Moving into Wayne Hall



By August 2014, we pack up our offices in Main Hall, which itself undergoes a facelift.

We run over to Wayne Hall to size up our new spaces and check renovations.



Our new Conference Room is created by the removal of two interior walls.

Finally, the moving van arrives in front of Wayne Hall.



As the movers unload, we make repairs.

We rearrange the furniture.



We unpack and get organized.

To see all the “After” views, stop by!



100th Anniversary of the Great Migration

2016 marks the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the Great Migration, one of the most significant historical transformations of the 20th century. Between the First World War and early 1970s more than 6.5 million African Americans fled the American South for northern and then western cities in a great mass exodus that transformed America and helped lay the ground work for the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

In Fall 2014, [Janneken Smucker](#) and [Charles Hardy](#) taught “[Digital Storytelling and the Great Migration to Philadelphia](#),” a combined course teaming WCU graduate students enrolled in Prof. Smucker’s graduate seminar in digital history with undergraduate Honors College students and history majors enrolled in Prof. Hardy’s special topics course.

Over the semester, students created [Goin’ North: Stories from the First Great Migration to Philadelphia](#), working with 22 oral history interviews with southern Blacks who migrated to Philadelphia in the early 1900s and Black Philadelphians who witnessed their arrival. First, the students created a [digital archive](#) of more than 400 images, newspaper articles, and other sources from national and [regional collections](#), including previously unpublished images from the Blockson Afro-American Collection and Special Collections at Temple University Libraries and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

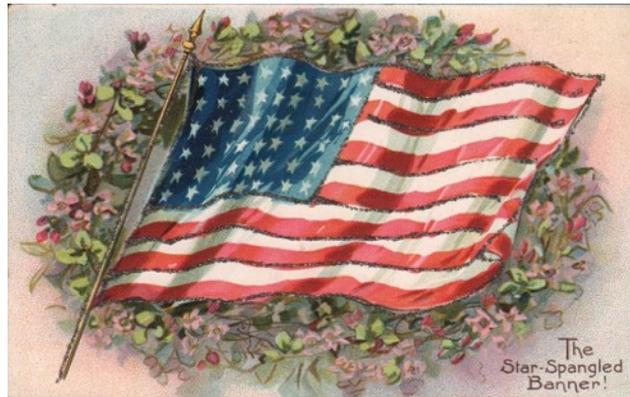
The students then audio edited the interview transcriptions, creating a taxonomy of close to 1,000 keyword terms. They created [detailed interview indexes](#) using [OHMS](#) (Oral History Metadata Synchronizer), a system developed by the [Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History](#) in the University of Kentucky Libraries, linking GPS coordinates, websites, images, articles from the *Philadelphia Tribune’s* archive, and other documents to animate each interview segment. Students created [biographical sketches](#) of 15 narrators, then worked in teams to create [6 digital storytelling](#) projects.

Already Goin’ North has received kudos both on and off campus. Rosemont College associate professor of history Michelle Moravec, in a March 24, 2015 [blog review](#) for the Middle Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities, called it “an exemplary project in its use of digital platforms to bring earlier historical technologies into the 21st century.” “Goin’ North,” she writes, “is a sheer delight to explore, but it also offers a wealth of information that will be useful to both researchers as well as teachers.... As an oral historian, I’m well aware of just how many taped interviews languish in archives, seldom listened to and never transcribed. The work Hardy, Smucker, and the West Chester University students have done to creatively re-envision ways of presenting oral histories to the public is truly remarkable.”

On campus, undergraduates Derek Duquette, John Smith III, and Kristen Waltz, and graduate student Kristin Geiger, received the 2015 Student Research and Creativity Awards, while Professors Hardy and Smucker were named co-recipients of the C. Riley Holman Award for innovation and creativity in teaching. In Spring 2016, Smucker and Hardy will again teach “Digital Storytelling and the Great Migration to Philadelphia.” WCU students will continue to add to the Goin’ North digital archive and create new digital storytelling projects to accompany those featured here.



Second Annual One-Day History Conference



Dr. Anne Krulikowski organized the second annual History one-day conference, held on October 23, 2014. This year's theme was related to two important national anniversaries: the 200th anniversary of the Star-Spangled Banner and the 50th Anniversary of the National Museum of American History.

Conference presenters came from four different regions of the United States and explored a wide variety of topics and time periods. Adjunct History professor Angelo Repoussis examined American support for the Greek Revolution in the early 19th century, while Elliot Lam (Cal State-Fullerton) examined the contested identities of Vietnamese-Americans. Keynote Speaker and independent curator, David Lembeck, provided an engaging exploration of Pennsylvania's Depression Era Post-Office Murals.

Afterward, conference attendees had the opportunity to view WCU's collection of models made as part of the New Deal's Museum Extension Project. Mame Purce, Library, and Thomas Legg, History Department, introduced the panels.

See Dr. Brenda Gaydosh's Call for Proposals for the 3rd annual conference on HNET.



Helicopter History



LOCAL MAN HAD BIG ROLE IN HELICOPTER DEVELOPMENT

(excerpted from the Philadelphia Inquirer, November 15, 2014)

In the days when the Philadelphia area was the hub for new discoveries in rotary aviation, Merion's E. Burke Wilford Jr. worked alongside a pioneering group of inventors. Arthur Young, a neighbor, designed a helicopter that was the forerunner of the one shown in the movie and TV show *M*A*S*H*. Frank Piasecki, who sometimes stopped by for lunch, pioneered U.S. helicopters operating with two main rotors. Harold Pitcairn, a Bryn Athyn competitor, beat out Wilford for the same license to produce a rotary winged aircraft in the United States, the autogyro. The accomplishments of Wilford's circle of friends in the 1920s and '30s fill books and museums, but those of the man credited with designing the first American aircraft to fly without wings remain unknown to many.

"He was an intellectual and an eccentric; a visionary inventor who contributed without really looking to gain much back financially or in terms of notoriety," said Robert Kodosky, an associate professor of history at West Chester University.

Last week, Kodosky led a group tour of an exhibit at the school that chronicled Wilford's exploits in the early 20th century. The tour was part of a conference Kodosky organized commemorating the Vietnam War's 50th anniversary and examining the critical role of rotary aircraft in what is known as "The Helicopter War."

Wilford's work can be consider a "step" in the development of the helicopter, said Vietnam War pilot Charlie McManus, of Chester Springs, a board member of the American Helicopter Museum & Education Center in West Chester. Wilford helped develop an American version of the autogyro, an aircraft whose control and propulsion are similar to that of an airplane, but whose lift comes from a rotor on top. The rotor's blades rely on the movement of air to spin. Wilford's work, along with those of his contemporaries, and the continued production of helicopters in the area by firms including Boeing in Ridley Park make the region "the birthplace of rotary aviation," McManus said. "That was the Lindbergh era, and I caught the aviation bug," Wilford said in a 1966 interview.

West Chester student Adam Farence discovered Wilford during a trip to the helicopter museum. When Farence heard about Wilford's contributions, he set in motion the process that led to the university exhibit. "His story is underrepresented," Farence said. Robert Wilford is glad his father is getting a bit of recognition. "He was a pioneer," he said. "It's nice for him to be remembered."

100th Anniversary of Armenian Genocide

The year 2015 marks the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. As we did last year for the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan Genocide, the Holocaust and Genocide Studies Graduate Program and the Department of History marked the centennial event with programs on campus.

On Thursday, February 26, 2015, co-sponsors Contemporary Issues and the Department of History showed the Atom Egoyan film, *Ararat*, in Sykes Student Union Theater. Guided by Mame Purce, we had two display cabinets in the library depicting the Armenian genocide and Armenia today.

On Monday evening, March 30, 2015, we held a roundtable discussion (serving Armenian desserts and refreshments) for WCU students and members of the regional Armenian community in Francis Harvey Green Library.

Our main event took place Wednesday evening, March 4, 2015, at 7:30 p.m. in the Philips Autograph Library. Our “Symposium on the Armenian Genocide” included two speakers: 1) Andrew Malkasian is of Armenian descent and a WCU alumnus of the Department of History; 2) Aysenur Korkmaz came to us from Turkey. She is graduating from Central European University (Budapest) with a Master of Arts in Nationalism Studies.

The symposium would not have been possible without the financial support of Library Services (Richard Swain), Student Activities Council (Barrett McGee), Holocaust and Genocide Studies Graduate Program (Jonathan Friedman), Center for International Studies (Peter Loedel), and Peace and Conflict Studies (Dean Johnson).

We were very happy to have so many members of the regional Armenian community with us for these events.



Andrew Malkasian (WCU – History, 2013) and Aysenur Korkmaz sit next to each other in the front row.

2015 Phi Alpha Theta Conference



On 18 April 2015, Ursinus College hosted the Phi Alpha Theta regional conference for eastern Pennsylvania. This is an annual event that attracted over one hundred participants this year from twenty-five different colleges and universities.

WCU professors Brent Ruswick, Eric Fournier and Robert J. Kodosky attended the conference. They judged papers for awards and chaired panels.

Two of our department's finest students, Katherine Cromleigh and Kristen Waltz, submitted abstracts that earned acceptance into the conference. Both worked to refine their papers into presentations that they delivered at the meeting, representing well the history program at WCU.

Kristen's paper, "Sketch to Cyberspace, Evolution of the Smiley Face," and Kate's work, "Why did the Great Civil War break out in England in 1642," received overwhelmingly positive reviews from session attendees.

Next year, on 9 April 2016, Nu-Sigma, the history honors chapter at West Chester University, will proudly host the conference.

Faculty-Staff News

Dr. Marita Boes, professor emerita, had a review of her book, *Crime and Punishment in Early Modern Germany: Courts and Adjudicatory Practices in Frankfurt am Main, 1562-1696* (Ashgate, UK, 2013), appear in the *European History Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2015.

Dr. Karin Gedge and her talented HIS 451 Women in America students successfully put Anne Hutchinson on trial again in a *Reacting to the Past* simulation game. Despite a spirited debate informed by relevant theology and scripture passages, she was again banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony for her challenges to authority.

Dr. Jim Jones became the first member of the department ever appointed to the West Chester Borough Historical & Architectural Review Board. The "HARB" reviews building plans and development projects for their consistency with the historic look of West Chester. Dr. Jones, who has written two books on West Chester history, was selected for his ability to explain the historical context of the Borough's different neighborhoods. He has been selected to lead one of ten historic walking tours sponsored by the County of Chester in the northwest part of West Chester on Thursday, June 11, 2015. The tour will depart from the Chester County Historical Society at 6:00 pm.

Dr. Lisa Kirschenbaum's book *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and Suspicion* will be published by Cambridge University Press in July 2015.

Dr. Bob Kodosky is also takes history outside the classroom. In HIS 352 American Military History, he has students visit the Delaware County Veterans Memorial on West Chester Pike in Edgemont, PA. There, each student chooses a name from the wall of thousands who lost their lives in American wars, dating back to the Revolutionary War. Students then research their names and produce biographies, which Dr. Kodosky edits. Their work is used by the Delaware County Historical Society and Veterans Memorial. Joseph Daly, Chief of Police of Springfield, wrote: "These were very well done. These bios serve as reminders of the sacrifices made and that continued to be made to keep our great Country Free. These bios transform these men from names on a wall and bring them back to life for the reader. More importantly once read their memories live on in the hearts and minds of the reader. I was moved by every paper and two were very personal. . . I applaud and thank you and the participating Students from West Chester University for not allowing the memories of these fallen Heroes to be forgotten."

Dr. Anne Krulikowski had a previously published article included in an anthology, *Vernacular America* (Chicago, 2014), and a new article entitled "The Shop Around the Corner: Change, Continuity, and the Independent Neighborhood Grocer" included in *Shopping: Material Culture Perspectives* (Delaware/Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). In addition, she presented papers at two conferences and had three book reviews appear in print.

Ms. Carole Marciano, our very own, received a History nomination for the 26th Annual Individual Staff Employee Recognition Award for her diverse and significant contributions to the Department, our students, and the University.



Dr. Brent Ruswick competed in multiple events at WCU's annual Banana Day on April 15, 2015 [third Wednesday every April] to win a banana and coveted Banana Day t-shirt.



Student Departmental Awards

At the CAS Student Recognition Ceremony on April 27, 2015 in Sykes Ballroom, and the Phi Alpha Theta Induction Ceremony on April 30 at the Chester County Historical Society, we announced this year's Department award recipients:

Thomas Mandracchia won the Drayer Memorial Award, given annually to the graduating senior with the most distinguished record in History, in tribute to Dr. Robert Drayer's commitment to teaching at WCU.

Stephen Campbell, Ebony Carter, Allison Cooke, Tijay Hildebrand, Zachary Kizitaff, Kaitlin Lederer, Aaron Lockard, and John Smith III won Drayer Scholarships, given annually to majors with strong credentials and need.

Katherine DiCicco, Casey Gendron, and Annie Murphy won Drayer Book Scholarships, given annually to majors with strong credentials and need.

Stephen Campbell won the Grey Award, given annually to one junior or senior major who exemplifies the legacy of Michael Grey, a history major who died in an accident in 1988; it recognizes humanitarian or environmental civic activity.

Aaron H. Lockard won the Ivins Scholarship, awarded annually to one exemplary major and teacher certification candidate in memory of Helen Ivins, Class of 1935, an inspirational high school teacher and faculty member here.

Alumni at Home and Abroad

Joseph Felice (Class of '12) at Penn State

On May 10, 2015, I graduated from Penn State University with a degree in Mechanical Engineering. As a senior, my design project was to work with a group brace via 3-D printing, otherwise known project involved design work in different iterations of the brace and version. This past semester, I enhanced interest in space flight by taking a Aerodynamics. Prior to entering Penn research I conducted as a student at race in *Quest: The History of* I hope to publish again in *Quest* for the 50th anniversary of the moon landing. (Photo: Joe at Commencement with PSU's Dr. Maicke, Prof of Aerodynamics, and Dr. Ciocci, Mechanical Engineering Chair)



to produce a modern version of a neck as additive manufacturing. The SolidWorks, 3-D manufacturing three concluded with assembly of each my knowledge in regard to my course in Incompressible State, I had the honor of publishing WCU related to the Cold War space *Spaceflight Quarterly*. In a few years,

In a few years, I hope to publish again in *Quest* for the 50th anniversary of the moon landing. (Photo: Joe at Commencement with PSU's Dr. Maicke, Prof of Aerodynamics, and Dr. Ciocci, Mechanical Engineering Chair)

Daniel Burke (Class of '13) in China

I graduated from WCU two years ago. During my time, interests drifted from general World history to East Asia in particular. In class, we are taught to doubt what we know, to seek our own answers and form our own hypothesis about how the World truly is and not just how came to China to see with eyes contradictions. It holds both the deep past both soaring glamour and toxic squalor. It identity crisis. China has a mystery around you understand it, it wrestles away from can simply be told. Like the senses definition. How does one describe what unbowed as the breath inside all of us, and through it. Frankly, I couldn't dream of anything else I would rather be doing. (Photo: Dan at conference, pre-graduation)



others tell us it could be. So, naturally, I unconstrained. It truly is a land of and the keys to the future. It contains has both a thriving culture and a grave every corner and as soon as you think your grip. But, it's not something that themselves, modern China defies blue looks like? History is as alive and it's our job to map a rough sketch

Nicholas Giorgio (Class of '14) in China, Japan, and Korea

I'm currently teaching English at Xi Xiang Middle School in Shenzhen, China. I'll be coming back here next year, while working towards going to graduate school in either Hong Kong or Japan. I've been taking classes in Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean, and plan on taking the HSK [Chinese Proficiency Test] 5 sometime next year. So far I've traveled to Tokyo, Seoul, and various cities in China, including Zhuhai, Macau, and Hong Kong. I'm very anxious to see what the next few years have in store for me. (Photos: Nick with Chinese summer camp students; at No. 1 MaiDreamin Cafe in Tokyo; at Hyangwonjeong Pavilion in Gyeongbokgung, main palace of Joseon Dynasty [1392-1897], Seoul)



Jon Jasper (Class of '14): Explore the World

I remember the moment like it was yesterday. I was in my ancient Chinese history class with Dr. Chien, when a former student entered and gave a presentation about CTLC, Center for Teaching and Learning in China. Immediately, I became interested in this opportunity to explore another part of the world. After class, I ran outside and called my mom and discussed this opportunity. My mother knew that I was still in the middle of my college career and dismissed it as one of my many obsessive impulses that fade quickly. Fast-forward three years, and I am hugging my parents and girlfriend goodbye at Philadelphia airport. As I was standing in line at five in the morning, I recall telling myself "Hey, this is it, you have a real job and more importantly are GOING TO CHINA!" I have to admit, when I was leaving I was petrified. I am one of the more picky eaters, came home every weekend during college, and knew absolutely ZERO Mandarin. (I confess I did not even open the Mandarin for Dummies I bought that summer).

Although I was frightened of the unknown, I was excited to learn some a new culture and see some historical and beautiful places. Throughout the past year I have been fortunate enough to travel to seven different cities in China, six depending on what you consider Hong Kong ;), and two other countries besides China. I have seen some amazing things, some of which I am more than happy to share with you. The first opportunity I had to travel was during Chinese National Week. I decided to go with a large group of friends to Yangshuo, China. This city was breath-taking, my favorite part was simply walking through the countryside taking in the unique environment and landscape.



My next adventure occurred during the Chinese New Year, in which I had about 40 days to travel! During this time I flew to Beijing, Xi'an, Thailand, and Cambodia. Beijing was my favorite part of my trip. When I stepped off the plane I was beyond belief, you are in one of the most historical cities in the world. (Also it was not 85 degrees and humid, which was awesome!) Being in Beijing I did many things, but the highlight was obviously the Great Wall! I went to a secluded section while there was a light snow and it was mesmerizing. I even hiked to the old section of the wall, which many others did not manage.

After Beijing, I took a train to Xi'an, a very old and former capital city of China. Here I got to see one of the new wonders of the world, the Terracotta Warriors, but the real beauty was Mount Huashan. One morning I went to the famous mountain and was able to hike all five peaks! This was the hardest hike I have ever made, not to say the steepest! (I hope you enjoy steps!) The views from here were gorgeous.



After the cold northern Chinese cities and sightseeing, I decided to put my feet up and relax in Thailand. That is exactly what I did for 9 days! I was able to find time to not be on the beach and get to the Royal Palace, a place worth visiting. After Thailand, I took a van (actually many vans- it was quite nerve wracking) to Cambodia. Cambodia and Beijing were the best part of my travels. Being interested in history, I was aware of what Cambodia experienced during the 70's. However witnessing the aftermath of it deeply moved me. I was able to visit the killing fields and some prisons in which human beings were brutally murdered. I was fortunate enough to meet one of the handful of survivors from the infamous S21 prison camp. Listening and learning his story reminded me of the importance of studying history, to remember what people went through, and try to ensure that it never happens again. The only way this can be done is to instill equality, peace, and love in all of our students, and show what can happen when the opposite is instilled into people.



Overall, my travels in China have allowed me to learn a language, experience an incredible culture, and see many spectacular places. Although these sound wonderful, the best part of this trip are the friends that I met along the way. Now that my time is coming to an end, what I am most upset about are the friends that I will be leaving behind. I don't know if I could have made it a year away from my family, friends, and girlfriend without the constant support of the people I met here. From the local shop keeper, to my students parents, to my students themselves, these people have made this experience a once in a lifetime event. Looking back on this year, I have gained so many independent and professional skills, but the most important thing I have acquired are the friendships. Thanks China! I love you!



Brock Morningstar (Class of '12) in Mainland China and Taiwan

Brock has been in China since taking HIS 400 Seminar: Global Migration, graduating in Spring 2012, and being accepted to the Center for Teaching and Learning in China program. He taught English for two years, including to grades 6, 7, and 8 at Nanshan Foreign Language School in Shenzhen, with classes of 30-40 kids. He has traveled extensively in the region. He is currently engaged in Mandarin studies in Taiwan. Brock is considering various options for the future which will build on his knowledge of Chinese culture and history, his international experience, and his foreign language skills. (Photos: at train station and beside the Library at Peking University)



Benjamin Wirjosemito (Class of '10): Global Traveler

您好！Nin men hao! My name is Benjamin Wirjosemito and I am a member of the graduating class of 2010. After finishing my Bachelor's in History, I embarked on an adventure that would take me into uncharted territory. I decided to teach English as a Second Language in Zhongshan, Guangdong, China. (Photo: on Great Wall in WCU Roller Hockey T-shirt)



Originally, I set out to teach abroad for only one year. As most people who have traveled abroad will tell you, there is a certain gravitating force that prevents you from returning home and settling back into American life. The experiences that I had in my first year living in China have changed my life forever. The amount of cultural enrichment that I was exposed to on a daily basis left me in a constant state of curiosity; a curiosity fed only by the experiences and adventures of life abroad. (Photo: Kungfu training in Zhongshan, China)

I was able to travel all most of China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Most importantly, after two and a half years teaching in Zhongshan, I not only understood the cultural and historical trends that are happening now, but I also became fluent in Mandarin Chinese. (Photo: with Indonesian family, Java, Indonesia)



During my tenure in Zhongshan, I met the woman of my dreams and moved to her hometown of Valencia, Spain. It was there where I tried to live, learn, and understand Spanish culture in the same way that I tried to understand Chinese culture. I often told myself, "if you want to speak Chinese, you must think in Chinese." As was the case in China, I was jumping into another proverbial pool, and it was time to swim again, fully immersing myself into yet another completely different culture. (Photo: wedding day in Spain)

After teaching English in Spain for nearly two years, I became fluent in Spanish as well. I also had the opportunity to travel all of Spain, Germany, Scotland, and Greece. After our wedding, my wife and I both decided it was best to move back to China where the opportunities for our careers were plentiful and fruitful. (Photo: on honeymoon in Greece)



Four years after taking that first giant leap into the great unknown, I am now fluent in Mandarin and Spanish, I am a happily married man to another worldly traveler, and I now currently teach Secondary World History and Geography at the Weiming International School in Guangzhou. The hardest part of this adventure was that first step. Everything else has been quite a ride. As the saying goes, "buy the ticket, take the ride." (Photo: Ben with Model UN students, Weiming International School, China)

Reflections of an Alumna: Ms. Danielle Lehr (Class of '12)

(Phi Alpha Theta Induction Ceremony speech, in its entirety, Chester County Historical Society, April 30, 2015)

I want to thank the faculty of the West Chester University History Department, especially Dr. Gimber, Dr. Hardy, and Dr. Kodosky for reaching out to me and inviting me to speak. I called West Chester my home for four years and it is an honor to return to be with you today.

I want to offer my congratulations to you, the inductees of Phi Alpha Theta, for everything you have achieved during your time at West Chester University. You have written countless papers, you have balanced courses with work and extracurricular activities, and you have formed friendships that will last a lifetime. As many of you will graduate soon, please take a moment at some point today to reflect on your time at West Chester and congratulate yourself!

Now, I have to be honest with you. I was sitting where you are only four years ago. I just started my full-time career in January. My grandmother still asks me, “How’s the new job? Do they pay you real money?!” Clearly, I don’t have it all “figured out.” But I am happy to tell you that I love my job and I am thankful for every opportunity I have had that led me to where I am. So today, I am speaking especially to those of you who are unsure about the path you are on – those of you who are brilliant students, but who don’t yet have an answer to the question, “History?! What are you going to do with THAT?!”

Unfortunately, there is no magic formula I could give that will take you from West Chester to employment; our field just doesn’t work that way. But don’t let that overwhelm you! I hope you will take my talk today as an invitation to explore your options a little more and to have fun with the process. You all excel in your study of history. You are capable researchers, writers, and critical thinkers. And while those skills alone are often enough to land you an excellent job, I can now speak from experience and say one of the best decisions you could make is to take what you have learned in the classroom and apply it as soon as you can, and as often as you can. So, as I reflected on my journey from West Chester to employment, I boiled it down to four important lessons that I learned and that I hope will be useful to you.

Like most of you, my career in the history field has been a long time coming. I was that kid in colonial summer camp who found complete joy in hand dipping candles for hours. My parents encouraged my passion by taking our family on vacations to historic sites on the east coast. It is my opinion that the family vacation package to Colonial Williamsburg should come with the following label: “WARNING: bringing your child to Colonial Williamsburg may cause a lifelong fascination with the eighteenth century and cause him or her to pursue a degree in a humanities field.”

Sure enough, I found my way into the History Department at West Chester University. When I was sitting in this room waiting to be inducted into Phi Alpha Theta, I considered a career in the museum field, but I didn’t know what my path to the world of museums would look like. I tried to be the best student I could be in the classroom, but I still didn’t have the “real world” experience to confirm that the choice was right for me. The summer before my senior year, I finally decided to act. I went to one of my favorite historic sites, Pennsbury Manor, and asked if they had any room for a summer intern. They said, “Would you work in the garden?” And there is the first lesson I learned:

JUST ASK.

In the summer of 2011 I became a historic gardening intern at Pennsbury Manor, William Penn’s recreated summer estate on the Delaware River. I did not expect my first experience in the museum field to involve lawn mowers, hedge trimmers, and tillers, but it did. I didn’t plan on becoming a full-time gardener, but I loved learning about an aspect of the living history field that I hadn’t considered much before. I gained a new appreciation for those who care for museums’ living collections, like plants and animals. It felt normal to come into work clean and to leave completely covered in sunscreen and dirt.

I also began working with school groups for the first time, helping them with gardening activities. It was not the traditional museum internship, but I couldn’t have asked for a better introduction to the world of museums. And it happened all because I just asked. That summer, I realized just how expansive the museum world is, and that I needed to explore more of that world. That brings me to the second lesson I learned:

IT IS NEVER TOO EARLY OR TOO LATE TO PICK UP A NEW SKILL.

In the fall of my senior year, Dr. Gimber, Dr. Hardy and I began talking about more internship opportunities. They brought up a site called the Mill at Anselma, an eighteen-century gristmill located in Chester Springs. I knew absolutely nothing about gristmills but I knew almost nothing about gardening when I started at Pennsbury Manor so I said, “why not?”

As a research intern, it was my job to write a narrative history of the gristmill’s restoration. This required hours of pouring over documents and photographs. This was my introduction to archival techniques. When I found out I would have the opportunity to interview the contractor who actually led the restoration, I met with Dr. Hardy and asked him to give me some pointers on how to conduct an oral history interview. I had learned about archives and oral histories in the classroom, but it was a completely different experience to put what I learned into action.

After I graduated from West Chester in 2012, I went back to school at Lehigh University for my master’s degree in Public History. A large part of my graduate coursework involved conducting, processing, and archiving oral history interviews. I also had to learn the basic elements of web design so my classmates and I could make the interviews accessible to the public. As someone who still doesn’t have a smart phone, this was quite a challenge! I didn’t know if I would ever use these skills in my career, but I figured it couldn’t hurt to prepare.

So there I was: a graduate student who had completed two wonderful internships. I was involved with community history projects. I took courses in archives, oral history interviews, and digital history. I had presented at conferences and I was confident in my skills as a researcher and writer. But as I completed my coursework, I felt the familiar graduation panic set in. I still felt like I had missed something along the way. I began to wonder if I had made a mistake by not getting my education certification.

Then, on one of my regular visits to the Colonial Williamsburg website, I saw a job description for an internship with the Colonial Williamsburg Teacher Institute. I had worked with students in the past, but I had never thought about working directly with teachers. And that brings me to lesson number three:

WORK WITH DIFFERENT GROUPS OF PEOPLE.

My summer with the Colonial Williamsburg Teacher Institute changed my life. I had the pleasure of working with about one hundred elementary school teachers from across the country and talking with them about their experiences in the classroom. I listened to the struggles many of them face as they go up against time constraints and curriculum demands. But I also heard them say things like, “I can’t wait to take this lesson plan back to the classroom!” and, “I never liked history but now I’m going to ask my principal if I can teach it!”

Because I met this group of passionate people, I began to see myself working with teachers as my full-time career. I got excited when I thought about the ways museums could serve as resources for both students and teachers. My job search was no longer something I dreaded, but something I looked forward to. And that brings me to the final lesson I learned that I’ll share today:

DON’T BURN YOUR BRIDGES.

When I moved back to Pennsylvania I did the only thing I could do while I applied for jobs: I went back to doing volunteer work at Pennsbury Manor. And while there was no job waiting for me, something else was waiting for me – a group of people who had supported me throughout my college education. That group of people included family and friends, but it also included West Chester University professors, Lehigh University professors, and supervisors from my various internships. They were the ones who had written me letters of recommendation, who had given me advice, and who had encouraged me to keep moving forward.

Within a few weeks, the position of Education Program Coordinator opened up at Pennsbury Manor. It felt like fate had stepped in, but looking back, I have come to realize that I began preparing for this position years ago. True, I am not a historic gardener. I am not a full-time archivist, oral historian, or classroom teacher. But I keep everything I learned from my internships with me on a daily basis.

I spend a lot of time scheduling school tours and making sure our programs run smoothly. But I still love going out to the garden with the school kids and incorporating science into our history programs. I draw from archival research when I evaluate our school programs and plan new ones. I talk with teachers to learn about how Pennsbury Manor can best serve them and their curriculum needs. And I still keep in touch with those who have helped me along the way.

So when you are overwhelmed in your job search or when you can’t find a good answer to the inevitable question, “What are you doing with that history degree?” just keep moving forward. The big picture doesn’t have to be crystal clear yet. Take every job, internship, and experience as an opportunity to learn something.

Remember Lesson one: Just ask! Ask your professors if they know of any available jobs or internships. Ask them what the path to their career looked like. Ask your history major friends what they are up to and how they like their jobs.

Lesson two: Pick up a new skill! If you love computers, think about digital history! If you love gardening, study historic gardening techniques! If you are passionate about education, put your teaching skills into practice!

Lesson three: Work with different groups of people. Try working with students and teachers. Become a member at a local museum and socialize with those who have similar interests as you. Volunteer at a historic site right alongside retirees and see what you can learn from them.

Lesson four: Don't burn your bridges. Drop your advisor a line once in a while and just give an update. Stay in touch with classmates through Facebook and encourage them in their future endeavors. Fill out the alumni survey on the history department website! Everyone here wants to see you succeed.

Finally, I want to encourage you to be creative and have fun as you move forward. These are the lessons I have learned, but I know you have already learned some of your own. I hope you will go out and learn more and enjoy it. Whether you have one year or one week left at West Chester University, you have time to explore, time to learn, and time to find your passion.

Congratulations to all of you.