

Why Does Claverack Have a Historian?

In 1919 New York became the only state to legislate the position of Public Historian. On April 11, 1919, Governor Al Smith signed, "Historian's Law", 57.07, mandating the position. Public, or town historians as they are most frequently referred to, are appointed by the town governments of each municipality in the state.



Al Smith, Governor of New York State, signed, "Historian's Law" in 1919. He served three terms, 1918, then 1924, and 1926(photo, en.wikipedia.org)

Why historians and why was the law enacted in 1919? One of the main reasons for the law came from the need to collect WWI service records at the local level. The basis for that was the poor quality, or absence altogether, of record keeping in previous wars. The lack of records of service personnel from the Civil War was the catalyst that motivated the sitting State Historian, James Sullivan, in 1919. In his experience a crisis was looming if historical documentation wasn't prioritized for the returning veterans of WWI. He proposed the idea of assigning a person for every town in the state to collect war service data for their communities and then by forwarding the collected data to the State Office of the Historian he assured the management and preservation of those records.



James Sullivan, 4th NYS Historian 1916-1923

The passage of the Historian's Law was at an opportune time in United States history when change was dynamic, and consequences were unprecedented. The WWI years were pivotal. The passage of the 19th amendment for women suffrage, the influenza epidemic brought sweeping changes to the world. In 1919, there was a period famously called the Red Summer. It was a time of unrest that came out of post war turmoil, returning GI's and the changes in race relations that fed into the violent and lethal episode in United States history.

That episode in history was collected differently when the growing newsreel business brought movie goers reality news as brief movie clips. Watching news at the movie theater, instead of listening to news on the radio, increased the appetite for visual information. Viewership grew exponentially with the growth of the motion picture industry and the transfer of the newsreel industry from its origin as Pathe' News in Paris to companies in New York. The post war years brought changes that would stick and affect the way people viewed history, collected, and preserved it.

The public historian's role, post WWI, was to collect the service records for returning veterans. After the war ended, and the need for service data collection tapered off, the role of public historians broadened. Historians found other things to do, teaching history, and in promoting historic preservation and activities at the local level. The role of public historian has continued to develop, and they may play an active and vital part in local tourism and economic development programs as often as providing history talks or presiding over commemorative events. It is at the discretion of each town to decide.

Public historians are appointed by each town's government to serve their constituency without regard to partisan politics. They have clearly defined responsibilities, and exclusions from their role, that are established by the State Office of the Historian and in accordance with the preferences of their municipality. For instance, historians are not to function as genealogists or as keepers of historic artifacts.

The role of historian is defined but the method is not prescribed. What the historian must do is teach and promote the history of places and people and incorporate that information in a relevant manner. Some historians prefer to provide talks and demonstrations and others may prefer photography or written work. During the pandemic most historians learned to use virtual programming to present their offerings.

The [Association of Public Historians of New York State](#) (APHYNS) represents all historians in the state. The APHNYS has a registered historian program and offers training, webinars, and meetings for new historians and all who are interested in broadening their knowledge. I became a Registered Historian in 2019.

In Claverack we are fortunate to have a town government that actively and enthusiastically supports the role of historian and a constituency that is interested and engaged in the history of the town. My appointment was in 2013 and an easy anniversary to remember because it was on Valentine's Day! The supervisor, at the time, asked that I prioritize continuity so that records would be preserved, and transitions would be as seamless as possible.

In Claverack, the historian is assigned space in the town office for storage and the historian's copies and materials are maintained in dedicated portable spots, external zips and labeled file cabinets. As historian for Claverack, I maintain a file of all of my historical sources, contact information and documentation.

Claverack has eight communities including Churchtown, Martindale, Hollowville, Brick Tavern, Humphreysville, the Village of Philmont, Mellenville, and the hamlet at State Routes 23B and 9H. Brick Tavern and Humphreysville were once hamlets with post offices and businesses. The historian covers the entire town including these communities. As historian I collaborate with other appointed and volunteer community historians and serves all who are interested in history and in promoting historic preservation and education in the town.

One of the first activities I undertook as Claverack's historian in 2013, was the "225th Anniversary of Claverack Celebration" and it became a yearlong calendar of events. Attention is now focused on the Semiquincentennial, the "250th Anniversary of the United States of America". Claverack should have a significant part in that celebration.

I want to thank Brenda Shufelt for asking me to author this article about the role of public historian. Please look for future articles on Claverack's history right here on the website in the future and on the Claverack History Facebook page at "Claverack History Minute". You can check it out here:

<https://www.facebook.com/claverackhistoryminute>.

Do you know Claverack has a historical society and they would love to hear from you? The “Claverack Historical Society” was reorganized in 2015. It is provisionally chartered by the NYS Department of Education and has historic collections that may be viewed by appointment. There is a new slate of officers this year. Please go to the website to learn more about it and please join!

<http://www.claverackhistoricalsociety.org/>

If you have any questions about Claverack history please contact me at my email address or phone. I welcome questions and look forward to any suggestions for future topics.



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