

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY



NEWSLETTER

FALL 2017

FIFTY YEARS OF HISTORY AT NEW PALTZ

More than fifty years ago, Gerald Sorin was a newly

hired history professor figuring out his multiple roles as an educator, research scholar, and member of various departmental, university, and regional communities. Paul Paskoff was a university student balancing running track, activism (such as taking to the quad his senior year with much of the rest of the student body in solidarity with the student protesters killed at Kent State), and the academic work expected from him by Gerry Sorin and his other history professors. Last year, the University held a celebration of Dr. Sorin's five decades of teaching, scholarship, and service to the university (all of which he still continues). The same week, the history department invited Paul Paskoff back to campus to speak to our students at the annual history honor's society reception. Now a Professor Emeritus after a distinguished career at Louisiana State University, Paskoff spoke about his recent research on the Civil War. While Professor Sorin's work as a teacher and scholar in the late 1960s roused Paul Paskoff's interest in American economic history, Gerald Sorin later switched fields and became a prominent scholar of Jewish Studies. That intellectual shift, his extensive publications, his work as a teacher and



Gerald Sorin

mentor, and his vital role in New Paltz's Jewish community were all attested to by the speakers and inspired the audience members at the event. Paul Paskoff's and Gerald Sorin's reflections are reported here. ■

Paul Paskoff

Professor Emeritus, Department of History, LSU, and Class of '70, State University College at New Paltz

In 1970, I graduated from New Paltz with a B.A. in history. Except for a couple of very brief visits since then, I had not spent any time on campus or, more to the point, thinking much about the place. That began to change about five years ago when I congratulated Gerry Sorin on the publication of one of his books and he replied. The brief exchange prompted me to reminisce about Gerry and my courses with him. He and the late Professor Donald D'Elia had a profound influence on my thinking and intellectual development. New Paltz listed me as a history major but the more accurate description would have been that I majored in Sorin and D'Elia. Graduate school made me into a professional historian; but, they encouraged me to become one.

The History Department's invitation to present the annual Phi Alpha Theta lecture last May happily coincided with the



Paul Paskoff at the Phi Alpha Theta Induction Ceremony



2016 Phi Alpha Theta Induction Ceremony



2016 Phi Alpha Theta Induction Ceremony

university's celebration of Gerry's 50 years' association with New Paltz. My wife and I flew from Baton Rouge, where both of us had recently retired as professors at Louisiana State University. Conversations with some of the history majors after my talk were quite enjoyable. Meeting the department's majors and the event in Gerry's honor were the highlights of our visit. I'd long appreciated how much he and his teaching, scholarship, and personal integrity have meant to me. The celebration of his career at New Paltz made clear how much they have meant to generations of students, colleagues, and the national and international scholarly communities. ■

Reflections On a Career Spanning a Half-Century

Gerry Sorin

This past May it was a great honor for me, after 50 years at SUNY New Paltz, to be celebrated by colleagues, friends and students. But really it has been, and continues to be, reward enough for me to have had the opportunity to be a contributing member here. In the classroom, or in the archives, or in my office conversing with a student, or with a book in hand at home, I have often felt like shoeless Joe Jackson (pre-Black Sox Scandal of 1919, of course) who said, "They let me play baseball and paid me besides!"

I am grateful to the college which has allowed me to do the things I have loved best in the academy—teach, and interact amiably and intellectually with my students and colleagues.

The patronage of the university has also permitted me to write. Writing can, and, in my estimation ought to be, an activity with social relevance, albeit with all the objectivity a human being, especially a teacher, can muster. The attempt to create imaginative and captivating sentences involves existential pain and frustration. Ah, but when it works....

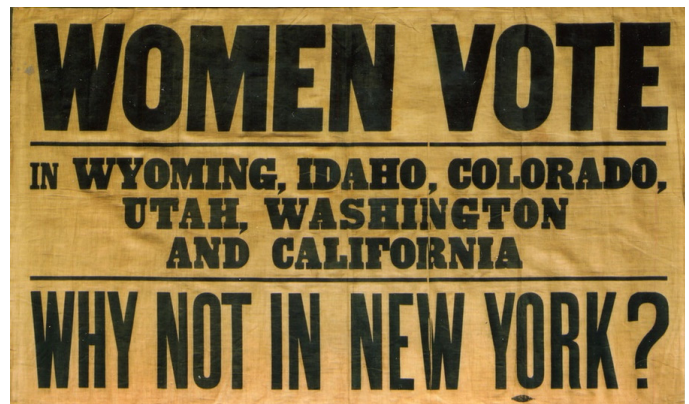
Much of the writing I do involves biography. My first book was published in 1971, my second in 1972. Both were about the men and women who fought for the end of slavery and the beginning of racial justice in pre-Civil War America. From the 19th century abolitionists, I moved to a collective biography of Jewish socialists. My book *The Prophetic Minority*, which not incidentally grew in great part out of provocative questions posed by my students, was a study of women and men at the turn of the twentieth century and in the Progressive Era who worked to end the exploitation of labor and to advance social justice. One more collective biography followed, involving young Jewish liberal activists in the 1940s.

A central proposition emerging from each of my studies is that the activists—abolitionists, socialists, or left-liberals—while not necessarily religious themselves in any traditional sense, were shaped by religious culture. Religious culture transformed in a modern secular context, which promoted fraternity and social progress on earth, in the here and now. It's good to be reminded of this possibility, particularly in a time when religion has too often been hijacked by militant, and often brutally-violent fundamentalists, or by more peaceful, but just as narrowly focused literalists.

When I moved from writing collective to individual biography I chose to investigate the life and work of the democratic socialist Irving Howe. He seemed to me a man whose progressive values were at least partly shaped by an ethno-religious cultural milieu. Mark Twain's admonition that a person's real life is known to no one but himself, and Freud's warning that whoever turns biographer commits himself to lies, sobered me; but ultimately, and especially with the encouragement of colleagues, I wrote the biography of the cultural and literary critic Irving Howe. A biography of the radical writer Howard Fast followed.

Writing these books has been an expansive experience. I had always been interested in literature, as many of my former students can attest, but after the Irving Howe research, I tried my hand at literary criticism, which among other things I continue to do with great delight. The prize winning novelist Dara Horn said something not too long ago about the creative imagination that I think applies as much to teaching, research and writing as it does to art and literature: "It is a group effort." I'm not certain, for example, that there would have been a Jewish Studies Program or a Resnick Lecture series here had it not been for Deborah Dash Moore, the Frederick G.

L. Huetwell Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Michigan, in whose extraordinary seminars at the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research in NY, I had the privilege to participate some 40 years ago; and I never would have grown as much as a director and teacher of Jewish Studies had I not had William Strongin ("Rabbi Bill") as a friend, spiritual mentor, and intellectual partner for over thirty years. And I even more seriously doubt my accomplishments would have been possible without my wife Myra Sorin's love and encouragement and extraordinary editorial skill. Nor do I think I would have been as meticulously diligent a scholar and teacher if I had not had curious and highly motivated students from the very beginning in 1965. It was the Sixties, after all. But that's another long story. ■



"Women in Politics: Past, Present, and Future" Conference a Great Success

In April, an event commemorating the centennial of women's suffrage in New York State came together after much planning. Susan Lewis, one of the department's faculty members, took the lead in putting together the program and lining up speakers over the previous year. Meg Devlin O'Sullivan, another of our historians, also joined the conference planning committee. While the centennial would have been worthy of celebrating regardless, the event came at a time when many had much to say and deep interest in the issue of women and politics. The conference approached the topic through the perspectives of history and political science. On Friday, April 21st, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand gave opening remarks at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt library in Hyde Park. Other prominent New York female politicians joined a roundtable, including the lieutenant governor of the state and the mayor of Albany. Various prominent experts on the history of women, their vote, and their political roles spoke, while attendees also learned of survey results on contemporary views of women in



connection with politics. On Saturday, the conference moved to the campus of SUNY New Paltz, where attendees could choose between academic panels or see student posters.

As part of the conference, students in Susan Lewis's Honors Course, U.S. Women Win the Vote, designed and presented posters based on their chosen research projects, including such topics as: "More than Friends: The Benefits of Lesbianism in the Women's Suffrage Movement"; "Not Just Sexism: The American Anti-Suffrage Movement"; "Was it Radical if it was Racist?"; "Working for the Vote: Working Women and the Suffrage Movement"; "Women Igniting the Pathway to Equality - Before Seneca Falls"; and (pictured) "How the West Won Votes for Women," presented by history majors Erin Miles and Scout Mercer. The posters were so impressive that we have been asked to present them again at the upcoming New York Women's Suffrage Centennial Conference to be held in Albany on November 4th. In the meantime, Lewis will be working on putting together an editorial volume on the topic. ■



Panelists from history and other departments at the "Women in Politics" conference; Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul (top right)

Seminar Students Present at Undergraduate History Conferences

On April 30, 2016, four history seminar students presented original research at a regional Phi Alpha Theta undergraduate conference held at SUNY Plattsburgh. These conference papers were the final product of work they completed in a seminar that focused on alcohol in the United States (taught by Prof. Meg Devlin O'Sullivan). James Carroll, Kat Christensen, Robert Sanchez Estrella, and Chris Parisi gave papers on the Woman's Christian Temperance Union; Prohibition in New York City's Chinatown; the connection between anti-immigration sentiments, eugenics, and the enforcement of Prohibition; and the public reception of Al Capone in Chicago, respectively.

Participation required extensive planning and preparation on the part of these students—from requisitioning funds to organizing travel to actually presenting their papers before a sizable audience of academics and students from across

the state and beyond. James, Kat, Robert, and Chris did an impressive job with all. Subsequently, all of their papers were selected by the meeting's organizers for inclusion in the digital proceedings of the conference. (This was an honor that was not extended to all participants.)

Like other students in Senior seminars, these four developed original research paper based on primary source interpretation aided by familiarity with historical arguments and context. But they also gained professional experience and recognition for research work. Since both are ideal for our students' development, Assistant Professor Andrea Gatzke expanded the opportunity to more seniors in spring 2017. As the coordinator of the Phi Alpha Theta Honors Society chapter on campus, Professor Gatzke arranged for eight students to take part in a regional conference. Their presentations covered topics ranging from classical Athens to "Life After a Nazi



Meg O'Sullivan and students



History majors Erin Miles and Scout Mercer, presenting posters based on their research projects

Childhood"; from concepts of territoriality in Poland to extra-territoriality in Shanghai; eighteenth-century authorship and credibility to Hellenistic Royal women and power. Other faculty helped coach them on presentation skills, cutting down their seminar papers to fifteen minute presentations, and finding financial aid to support their travel.

While the students' intellectual growth resulting from this

The SUNY New Paltz History Club

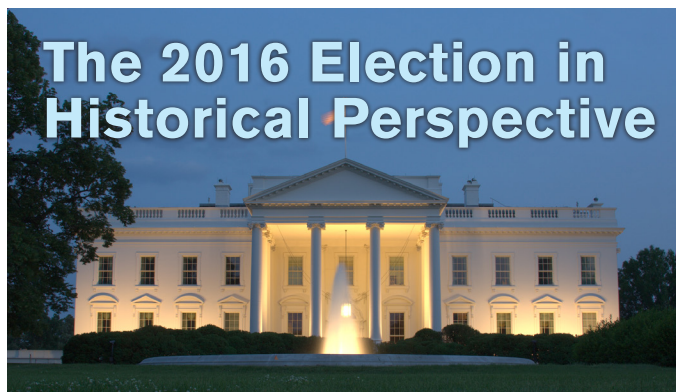
By Joseph L. Geidel, History Major

Imagine a community where students and lovers of history can come together and enjoy history-related events. Imagine a community where controversial historical topics are dissected, discussed, and debated. Imagine a community where people aren't afraid to speak out against resurfacing injustices and organize to prevent gross human rights violations from occurring. This community isn't a distant dream, but reality. My name is Joseph Geidel and I am the outgoing President of the SUNY New Paltz History Club. When I was elected, our organization was quite small and struggling to remain relevant. However, we have been able to turn our club around and mold it into an organization which brings history to life. We enjoy playing historically related games and going on trips to different historical sites. I believe our most important function is to serve as a medium for discussion and debate. Recently, the SUNY New Paltz History Club held an open discussion on the treatment of Native Americans throughout American history and investigated how the mistakes of our past can be rectified in the present. During this discussion we drew modern day parallels, from the Sioux fighting the planned construction of the Keystone XL pipeline to the ongoing standoff occurring at Standing Rock in North Dakota, as examples of continued injustices committed against the indigenous peoples of our continent. Come, friends, let us celebrate history together — at the SUNY New Paltz History Club. All are welcome.

Meetings: Tuesdays at 6:30 p.m. in the Honors Center.

experience is what we all work towards, a less anticipated result of Meg Devlin O'Sullivan's work to cultivate the students' development was her own professional development. Teaching two seminars in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and another in History, her resulting perspective on the disciplinary differences and comparative student strengths led to her thinking through differences in departmental teaching philosophies and practices. She has since undertaken a study of both departments' seminar pedagogy and developed an article on the topic, forthcoming in *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*. ■

The 2016 Election in Historical Perspective



Historical Perspectives on the Election

The November election results surprised many on the New Paltz campus. With students in classes the next day asking questions of our faculty about whether history had precedents, the department decided to offer a forum for the whole campus. An estimated two hundred students, faculty, and community members showed up to the November 15th event. Professor Lee Bernstein spoke about popular movements in the 1970s and 1980s that drove real change in the face of political resistance. Reynolds Scott-Childress and Susan Lewis, two of our other U.S. historians, spoke about cultural and gender divisions in our country. Professor Lewis compared the election results to the failed work to ratify an Equal Rights Amendment decades ago, arguing sexism accounted for both. Political Scientist Nancy Kassop, Dean of the library Mark Colvson, and Economist Cruz Bueno from the Black Studies department talked about, respectively, the structure and limitations on the executive branch, the importance of turning to the rich historical musical contributions of African Americans, and threats to economically marginalized communities. Andrew Evans organized the event and led the division of the crowd into small discussion groups. The faculty leading these discussions reported productive exchanges among students of various backgrounds and political persuasions. Since then, history students have continued to turn to history to help understand the contemporary political landscape. On March 2, 2017, the

student-led History Club organized a discussion on "Democracy in America, History & Today." As a prompt for the discussion, club secretary Edward Sganga circulated a New York Times article on the history of the phrase "Enemy of the People" from the French Revolution through the death of Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev's demand for an end to the phrase's use, which has been recently revived by Donald Trump. Our changing political and cultural landscape certainly reinforces the ongoing importance of studying the past to understand our present. ■

New Developments in the Department: Changes to Major Requirements, Increases in Student Internships, and forays into Local History

History majors have a new requirement: an introductory course to the major called "Historian's Craft." For the first time in years, the History department faculty undertook a substantial revision of the curriculum. While faculty continually develop new courses and new content for old courses to reflect the changing discipline, the structure of the major had remained unchanged for well over a decade. After teaching the senior seminar, the faculty in history regularly discussed how our students were doing in the culminating task of constructing a substantial independent research paper. Many students had not had sufficient, sustained exposure to research methods and discussions of what historians do before they took that class. Similar problems with students feeling unprepared for undertaking research or discussing historical arguments in upper-level classes also motivated the change. As a result, the department determined to better help our students understand the practice of history earlier in their majors. Soon after declaring the history major, students sign up for this four-credit class that teaches the practices of source analysis, research, and historical debate through a writing-intensive, discussion-based class limited to twenty students.

Internship opportunities in the mid-Hudson valley have provided some valuable chances for students to apply the knowledge and skills they learn in the classroom. One history student interning at New Paltz Rural Cemetery conducted research on people buried at the local graveyard, which included Civil War soldiers and extended to researching the military units those people had been assigned. A paid internship at Vassar Brothers hospital has a student of ours gain experience with archiving practices of collecting, digitizing, and organizing data.

Internships are optional within the major, but they constitute important experiences for students. Our total number of interns has been rising, now averaging about 10–12 students

annually. The growth in History internships mirrors the larger trajectory at SUNY New Paltz where increasing numbers of students are pursuing fieldwork. Increasing high-impact and hands-on learning opportunities for our students is part of the SUNY New Paltz strategic plan. Many of the internships in the area are unpaid or unrecognized, which presents a concern for the department, but the university has a summer scholarship people with internships can apply for and has started recognizing outstanding student performance in internships through an annual ceremony.

The History Department has received positive feedback from students who have conducted internships focusing on archival work and local history; we hope to grow the number of internships available and make the internship program in the department more systematic in the coming year.

Reynolds Scott-Childress' Local History Senior Seminar also

Alumni Build Community

- **Share your memories and milestones on our Facebook page**

Search Facebook for SUNY New Paltz History Department and 'Like' us

- **Come back and reconnect with our faculty and students at department events and receive future newsletters, which will be exclusively in electronic format.**

Get on our email lists, follow Facebook posts, or check the events page at newpaltz.edu/history

- **Tell the department what you are up to so we can develop alumni profiles for the website and future e-newsletters**

Stop by, call us (845-257-3545), or email the department chair at morrisoh@newpaltz.edu

- **Consider helping to support student scholarships, awards, development opportunities and events**

Donate online through the SUNY New Paltz Foundation (www.newpaltz.edu/gift/). Specify the donation is for the History program (after selecting 'Other' from the drop down menu). Or, mail contributions with your instructions to SUNY New Paltz Foundation, 1 Hawk Dr. New Paltz, NY. 12561-2443

Please be in touch!

encouraged fieldwork and experience in public history. Students have investigated a wide array of topics relating to the local history of Kingston. One explored the place of Ben Wigfall, an African American artist and former SUNY New Paltz faculty member, in developing the art scene in the Mid-Hudson Valley in the 1980s. Another examined the struggles of members of the Kingston branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union to gain political power in the late nineteenth century before women had obtained the right to vote. Others explored the relationship between technological development and social institutions, the history of African American women, the struggles of the early American artist John Vanderlyn, and much more. Their work aimed to be an accessible middle point between popular history and scholarly study. ■

History Faculty Strengthen SUNY New Paltz's Academic Standing

In recent years, several members of the history department took leading roles in ensuring the university continues to improve the quality of scholarship and education on campus. Susan Lewis (Associate Professor and Deputy Chair, New York History) chaired the committee to grant research awards and leaves to faculty to encourage their work in research and publication. Professor Louis Roper ended a multi-year term chairing the central committee of faculty making judgments on Reappointment, Tenure, and Promotion, to return to his own research on British colonies. Medievalist Michael Vargas led the successful national search for a new Provost, whose leadership over Academic Affairs and input on strategic planning will be vital during these times of ongoing serious budget restrictions. Lee Bernstein (20th Century US, History of Prisons) served as Associate Provost for the year, providing much needed guidance in improving Academic Advising and renewing the Black Studies program. Heather Morrison (Early Modern Europeanist) and Reynolds Scott-Childress (Gilded Age U.S. Historian) led a campus wide effort to restructure curriculum requirements by revitalizing General Education, focusing on the progressive development of our students' abilities in critical thinking and information management, and promoting developments in teaching and learning opportunities. Meanwhile, many members of the department led associated interdisciplinary minor programs like Asian Studies (Associate Professor Akira Shimada), Ancient Studies (Assistant Professor Andrea Gatzke), and Medieval and Early Modern Studies (Morrison). Historians' central role in the campus's commitment to liberal arts education and pursuit of scholarship ensures continued dedication to the quality of the university. Our department's high standards for knowledge production and educational rigor are recognized university wide. ■

Faculty Publications in 2016-2017

Kristine Harris published "On Language, Literature, and the Silent Screen," in *The New Literary History of Modern China*, with Harvard University Press.

Susan Lewis published a Review of Vernon Benjamin's *The History of the Hudson River Valley from Wilderness to the Civil War* (New York, N.Y., Overlook Press, 2014) in *The Hudson River Valley Review*.

Heather Morrison published two articles: "'They hear you tell of such things as if they were from America': Representations of the Newly Independent United States in an Austrian Botanist's Travelogue" in *Austrian History Yearbook 48* (2017) and "Open Competition in Botany and Diplomacy: The Habsburg Expedition of 1783" in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*.

Meg Devlin O'Sullivan published the articles "Informing Red Power and Transforming the Second Wave: Indigenous Women and the Struggle against Coerced Sterilization in the 1970s" in *Women's History Review* and "'More Destruction to These Family Ties': Native American Women, Child Welfare, and the Solution of Sovereignty" in *The Journal of Family History*. She also co-authored the article "Unlearning Introductions: Problematizing Pedagogies of Inclusion, Diversity, and Experience in the Women's and Gender Studies Introductory Course" published in *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture and Social Justice*.

Louis Roper published *Advancing Empire: English Interests and Overseas Expansion, 1613-1688* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). He also published the article "Fear and the Genesis of the English Empire in America" in a volume he helped edit, *Fear and the Shaping of Early American Societies*, and similarly contributed to and edited *Andrew Lyght: Full Circle for the Samuel Dorsky Museum at New Paltz*.

Akira Shimada edited with Michael Willis, *Amaravati: The Art of an Early Buddhist Monument in Context*, London: the British Museum, 2017.

Hamilton Stapell published two articles, on: "Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Rethinking Americanization, National Identity, and 'Difference' in Post-Franco Spain," in *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* and "Going Mainstream or Just a Passing Fad? The Future of the Ancestral Health Movement." In *Journal of Evolution and Health*. He also reviewed *Madrid's Forgotten Avant-Garde: Between Essentialism and Modernity* by Silvina Schammah Gesser in *European History Quarterly*.