

## National Council on Public History

NCPH is a tax-exempt (501c3) educational organization established in 1980 to encourage a broader interest in history and to bring together those people, institutions, agencies, businesses, and academic programs associated with the field of public history. For more information, visit [ncph.org](http://ncph.org).

## Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct

*Adopted by the Board of Directors of the National Council on Public History, April 12, 2007*

This Code of Ethics sets forth guidelines of professional conduct expected of all members of the National Council on Public History. Recognizing that public historians practice in a variety of specialized professional fields, this code incorporates reference to other codes and guidelines as appropriate. The purpose of this code is to articulate expectations of conscientious practice, not to set thresholds for certification, investigation, or adjudication. The National Council on Public History promotes ongoing discussion of ethics and professional conduct in classrooms, conferences, workshops, and professional literature as a best practice of the profession as a whole.

### The Public Historians' Responsibility to the Public

This code recognizes that the public may be defined in multiple and sometimes competing ways and that public interest is a fluid concept often formulated within the context of particular situations and subject to continuous debate. Nonetheless, ethical practice implies a responsibility to serve the public interest, as conscientiously determined in any given situation, and requires certain basic principles of professional conduct.

1. Public historians should serve as advocates for the preservation, care, and accessibility of historical records and resources of all kinds, including intangible cultural resources.
2. Public historians should carry out historical research and present historical evidence with integrity.
3. Public historians should strive to be culturally inclusive in the practice of history and in the presentation of history.
4. Public historians should be fully cognizant of the purpose or purposes for which their work is intended, recognizing that research-based decisions and actions may have long-term consequences.
5. Public historians should maintain a conscious regard for the interpersonal dynamics inherent in historical practice.

### The Public Historians' Responsibility to Clients and Employers

Public historians have a responsibility to perform work competently, diligently, creatively, and independently in pursuit of a client's or employer's interest, and a corollary responsibility to assure that such performance is consistent with their service to the public interest.

1. A public historian should respect the decisions of a client or employer concerning the objectives and nature of the professional services to be performed unless such performance involves conduct which is illegal, immoral, or unethical.
2. A public historian should maintain exclusive supervision over historical research studies and investigations.
3. A public historian should exercise independent professional judgment on behalf of a client and employer.
4. A public historian should not solicit prospective clients or employment through the use of false or misleading claims, harassment, or duress.
5. A public historian should not offer professional services by stating or implying an ability to influence decisions by improper means.
6. A public historian should not accept or continue to perform work that is beyond his or her professional competence.
7. A public historian should not perform work if there is an actual, apparent, or reasonably foreseeable conflict of interest, or an appearance of impropriety, without full written disclosure to the affected client/s or employer/s.
8. A public historian is obligated not to disclose information gained in a professional relationship when the client or employer has requested such information to be held confidential. Exceptions to the principle of non-disclosure must be made when required by process of law. Exceptions may be made when disclosure would prevent a violation of law or prevent a substantial injustice to the public interest. In such instances, a public historian must verify the facts and issues of the circumstance and, when practicable, make every reasonable effort to obtain separate opinions from other qualified professionals employed by the client or employer and every reasonable effort to obtain reconsideration from the client or employer.
9. A public historian should not use the power of any office or professional relationship to seek or obtain a special advantage that is not in the public interest.

## **The Public Historian's Responsibility to the Profession and to Colleagues**

Public historians should contribute to the development of the historical profession by advancing knowledge and improving methods, systems, procedures, and technical applications. More broadly, public historians should respect the professional views of their colleagues and peers in all professional fields. Public historians should strive to increase the diversity of the profession to reflect more closely the demographics of society. Equally important, public historians should strive to increase public understanding of the practice of public history.

1. A public historian should accurately represent the qualifications, views, and findings of colleagues.
2. A public historian should have a working knowledge of the methods, principles, and standards pertinent to specialized practice fields as appropriate to projects undertaken for clients or employers. A public historian also should be familiar with the broadly applicable Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct adopted by the American Historical Association.
3. A public historian should approach each research problem as unique, examine the applicability of research theories and methods to the facts and analysis of each particular situation, and use methods appropriate for each situation.

4. A public historian also should analyze each research problem within an appropriate body of scholarship drawn from all pertinent disciplines.

\*Applicable guidelines include but are not limited to the [Society of American Archivists' Code of Ethics for Archivists](#), the International Council of Museums' Code of Ethics, the [American Association of Museums' Code of Ethics for Museums](#), the [CMA Ethical Guidelines of the Canadian Museums Association](#), the [Principles and Standards of the Oral History Association](#), oral history guidelines promulgated by the [Canadian Oral History Association](#), the [Principles and Standards for Federal Historical Programs of the Society for History in the Federal Government](#), the [Parks Canada Guiding Principles and Operational Policies for Cultural Resource Management](#), the [Code of Ethics of the Canadian Association for Conservation of Cultural Property and of the Canadian Association of Professional Conservators](#), and the [Code of Practice of the Professional Historians' Association of New Zealand/Aotearoa](#).

5. A public historian should share the results of experience and research that contribute to the body of public historical knowledge.
6. A public historian who reviews the work of other professionals should do so in a fair, considerate, and respectful manner.
7. A public historian should contribute time and information to the professional development of students, interns, beginning professionals, and other colleagues.
8. A public historian should welcome opportunities to represent cultural diversity in his or her work and to enfold members of underrepresented groups into the profession.

## The Public Historian's Self-Responsibility

High standards of professional integrity, knowledge, and proficiency are the hallmarks of excellence in public history.

1. A public historian should represent professional qualifications and education accurately and fully.
2. A public historian should incorporate continuing education into his or her professional development.
3. A public historian should respect the rights of others.
4. A public historian should not discriminate against others.
5. A public historian should not deliberately commit a wrongful act which adversely affects his or her professional fitness.
6. A public historian should critically examine personal issues of social conscience as distinct from issues of ethical practice.