

Sheila A. Brennan

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Dear Professor Smith and Search Committee:

Please accept the attached materials as my application for the position of Director of Public Projects at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media and as Associate Professor in the History and Art History Department at George Mason University. I bring twenty years of experience in public humanities to this position, including nearly thirteen years of developing and managing 30+ digital projects at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media. Since joining RRCHNM in 2005, I have contributed to proposals yielding nearly \$13 million in grant and contract funding. Currently, as the Director of Strategic Initiatives and Acting Director of Public Projects, I oversee new and legacy digital public humanities projects that are accessible to audiences outside of academia, and develop platforms to enable that work that also empowers individuals to be active participants in their communities. As a Research Associate Professor, I teach faculty and scholars, cultural heritage professionals, and students in using digital tools and methodologies, as well as publish and present regularly on my Center and personal research agenda. My expertise is grounded in disciplinary training as a historian, experience as a public historian, and technical knowledge for using and building digital tools together with the administrative and management experience to run a division. I am excited at the prospect of serving as the Director of Public Projects and continuing digital public history work that is tied closely to the mission of the Center. And, by moving to the tenure track within the History and Art History Department, I look forward to taking a more active role in shaping the digital and public history curricula through teaching and advising graduate students.

My key areas of research and practice are in digital public history and humanities, experience that began while working in the museum field. Since my first museum job at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, I have sought opportunities that combine the rigor of historical research together with the challenge of engaging different public audiences with historical ideas and sources through new media and digital platforms. While working full-time at the National Museum of the US Navy, I began my PhD in American history at Mason. Under the guidance of advisers Roy Rosenzweig and Alison Landsberg, I focused on late nineteenth and early twentieth century cultural history, memory and material culture, and digital history. Research for a minor field statement on how history museums use web that began in 2004 continues to fuel my research that I discussed in a presentation at the most recent Museum Computer Network conference in November 2017.

After finishing my PhD, I became a Research Assistant Professor at Mason and Associate Director of Public Projects at RRCHNM. As I followed an aggressive sponsored research agenda for Center projects, I also began transforming my dissertation (which earned the United States Postal Service's Moroney Award for Scholarship on Postal History) into its next form as a digital publication. In 2012, *Stamping American Memory: Collectors, Citizens, and the Post* earned the first digital humanities publication prize from the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory and the University of Michigan Press <stampingamericanmemory.org>. *Stamping American Memory* explores the US Post Office Department's commemorative stamp program and the ways that citizens, stamp collectors, and elected and appointed government officials participated in conversations about national life in early-twentieth-century America. Many historians often overlook all aspects of postal operations and their influence on American culture.

Traditionally, the study of stamps has been the domain of collectors and enthusiasts who immerse themselves in learning the details of stamp design and production, and do not uncover the cultural contexts in which those stamps were produced. *Stamping American Memory* offers the first cultural history of stamp collecting by revealing how casual groups of collectors built communities and standardized practices through the formation of clubs, and how these practices influenced other hobbyist groups. Importantly, this project surfaces how the Post Office emerged in the early twentieth century as one of the most active federal agencies engaged in public history and memorial making prior to the New Deal. In an effort to make visible the process of developing a digital monograph with a university press, I published the project in different stages online, while also inviting open peer review within the digital platform where I revised the project. After both open and blind peer review, a final print and digital version of *Stamping American Memory* will be published by the University of Michigan Press in 2018.

I remain interested in the histories of collecting and plan to pursue additional research in this area. I am particularly excited to see a growing number of museums sharing collections data sets for researchers. There is a growing body of literature on the history of museums and exhibitions, and my next research projects will contribute to these conversations through a close examination of aggregations of collections data. Additionally, Fred Wilson's provocative "Mining the Museum" exhibition curated at the Maryland Historical Society twenty-five years ago inspires me to pursue opportunities for enabling community curation of digitized museum objects that invite social, political, and cultural critique through the juxtaposition of objects and ideas from across institutions. The position at Mason will allow me to pursue the intellectual, technical, and social questions connected to this kind of research, as well as to collaborate with the *Omeka* team to enable others to explore and publish similar projects.

As the Director of Public Projects, I will build on my established track record of launching successful digital public history projects, such as the award-winning *Histories of the National Mall* <mallhistory.org>. I plan to continue pursuing new projects in collaboration with colleagues in the department, and with partners at cultural heritage organizations that engage audiences outside of academia with historical themes and with sources that pique curiosity and challenge traditional assumptions. I will continue to publish and circulate free online guides and research white papers, such as "Building Histories of the National Mall" and "Mobile for Museums," that continue the long tradition at the Center of teaching others to be active builders, collaborators, and creators with their own communities.

Teaching and training scholars, graduate students, and museum, library, and archive professionals is an integral part of my current position. In recent years, I have co-led the DoingDH <doingdh.org> series of intensive summer institutes with the goals of training established scholars and graduate students in digital humanities theory, methodologies, and tools. Based on these experiences in developing in-person workshops for the NEH and Getty Foundation, the Social Science Research Council asked me to develop a series of self-guided online modules to introduce digital scholarship methods to their fellows. I understand how to teach digital novices working at different stages of their careers, experience I can readily apply to teaching the graduate digital history introductory course, "Clio Wired." I have worked closely with department Chair Brian Platt to establish a new virtual internship program for graduate students enrolled in Mason's Digital Public Humanities Certificate, and I am ready to teach the program's required Digital Public Humanities course. I am eager to contribute to the department's course offerings in public history, digital history, and museums and memory studies. For many years, my status as contingent faculty has meant I must decline requests from

graduate students asking that I serve as their dissertation adviser or as the first reader for minor fields. This position will finally afford me the opportunity to say yes.

One of the biggest challenges for the Director of Public Projects is contributing to the long-term sustainability of the Center. As a member of the senior staff at RRCHNM, I currently develop and write grant proposals, as well as pursue relationships with private foundations, individuals, and institutional collaborators. Since 2005, I have co-authored twenty-six successful grant proposals (in addition to many others that were not funded), and have served as the Project Director or Primary Investigator for eighteen major grants. Since earning a promotion to Research Associate Professor and Director of Strategic Initiatives, I have successfully developed relationships with new funders and pursued new collaborations in the areas of digital art history and digital scholarship training. As an American Council of Learned Societies Digital Extension Fellow, I have brought in funding to refresh and sustain one of the Center's significant legacy projects, the digital edition of the *Papers of the War Department*. In addition to sustaining existing projects, and developing new ones, the Director of Public Projects requires a committed leader who will enable the division's classified staff and graduate students to develop new skills, use their strengths, and engage in playfulness to sustain their creativity and energy. I recognize the managerial challenges that come with this position, and I am prepared to work within the Center to create an environment for everyone to thrive.

I am deeply committed to continuing Roy's vision for the Center and Mason's History and Art History Department. I would be delighted to join the Department as a tenure-track faculty member. I look forward to having the opportunity to speak at greater length with the search committee about my background and my aspirations as they relate to this position.

Sincerely Yours,



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