

## The History Professional

An Interview with Jason Steinhauer

*Jason Steinhauer serves as the inaugural director of the Lepage Center for History in the Public Interest at Villanova University. A noted public historian, he is a recognized emerging leader of America's cultural and historical institutions. He previously worked at The John W. Kluge Center of the Library of Congress, the Library of Congress Veterans History Project, as a museum curator and as an archivist. He coined the term "History Communicators" and established the field of history communication.*



Jason Steinhauer

Interview by Thomas Faith

### **Why did you decide to become Director of Villanova University's Albert Lepage Center for History in the Public Interest?**

It's more accurate to say that Villanova decided upon me. For that, I'm eternally grateful. I learned of the position on Twitter and applied via the Villanova website. (For those unconvinced of the value of social media, that's another example of how it can be beneficial.) Fortunately, I was selected, and I began in January 2017 as the inaugural director of the Lepage Center for History in the Public Interest. The position was a natural extension of my prior work in museums, archives, libraries, and government, communicating historical scholarship to diverse audiences. The situation was right, too, with a history department at Villanova committed to publicly-engaged scholarship. It felt like the right step at the right time.

### **How does the Lepage Center accomplish its mission, to bring "historical scholarship and historical perspective to bear on contemporary global issues," in practice?**

We deliver on our mission in a variety of ways: events, briefings, website, blog, social media, and podcasts. We see ourselves as bringing historical scholarship into forums where it may not always be present and sparking new conversations on contemporary issues that are civic-minded and historically grounded. A good example is our "History Briefings for Business Leaders." Launched earlier this year, we bring scholars into conversation with business leaders in Philadelphia, bringing historical perspective to bear on issues important to them and learning from them what matters to their companies and to their constituencies. That dialogue helps infuse historical thinking into the business world and helps build bridges between academics and corporate leaders.

### **The Lepage Center is a relatively new institution, what are some things you hope to accomplish there in the next few years?**

At time of writing we are just over one year old. For such a short time, we are really pleased with what we've accomplished: events, fellowships, briefings, online resources, and career training for historians. In the future we aspire to expand our capacity to do events across the country, including D.C., New York, Los Angeles, and Boston, produce more online resources, deliver more content via new media, include more scholars in our activities, and

continue to be a leader in raising historical consciousness among leaders and citizens. We have big aspirations, and we feel confident we can achieve them.

### **What aspect of your personal or professional experiences do you think most influences your approach to your current position?**

Great question. I think it's the fragility and preciousness of human connection. When we meaningfully connect with one another, it is incredibly powerful. It allows us to conquer challenges, create change, and achieve positive impact in our communities. But our connections are fragile. They can be easily disrupted by politics, partisanship, injustices (actual or perceived), inequalities, and ego. I have seen that in both my personal and professional life, and it continues to drive me to be a better bridge-builder, connection-maker, and to forge strong partnerships across ideological lines in order to find common ground.

### **What was the biggest challenge you managed in the transition from federal employment to academia?**

There have been many challenges, and I continue to learn on the job how to navigate them. One challenge has been the schedule: I came from an agency where you signed in and signed out each day, and all staff were expected to be in the office for 8 hours. My first two weeks at Villanova, I was the only person on my floor! It was winter break, and the students and faculty were not on campus. The shifting schedule each semester, having colleagues in and out at all hours of the week, has been a challenge. It can be hard to solidify the relationships when we are all pulled in so many directions.

### **What advice can you offer federal historians, librarians, archivists, and other professionals about how to provide their agencies with effective policy support?**

My primary advice would be to invest in relationships. Becoming a trusted advisor to policymakers is the surest way to gain influence. I'd also stress patience. Change does not occur quickly, and relationships take time to build. There are no silver bullets, especially in Washington. Being patient, persistent, and investing in relationships is a great place to start.

**In your 2017 *cnn.com* article, “The Twitter Problem That Could Change History,” you argue that “a forum such as Twitter is therefore an important opportunity to clarify information for citizens and hold political leaders and state actors accountable in their use and abuse of the past.” What strategies should historians use to further their impact on social media to that end?**

My advice would be the same as above. Invest in relationships. Relationships in the digital world are an extension of human interaction in the physical world—and vice-versa. Invest in meaningful connections on social media, with people and organizations. Opt for quality of posts, not quantity. Be cognizant of ongoing conversations and chime in where you have expertise. Be positive. Be supportive. Be helpful. And be patient. It’s rare that anyone becomes a social media influencer overnight.

**Do you think historians employed by the federal government can serve as history communicators as effectively as those employed outside the federal government?**

Absolutely. Our elected officials and civil servants rely on historical knowledge for information and decision-making. The effective communication of historical scholarship to non-experts through various media is critical within the federal government. History Communicators actually began when I was a federal employee at the Library of Congress. My job was to communicate the scholarship of historians doing research at the Library to Congress to Members of Congress, Congressional staff, policymakers and wider audiences. That inspired me to advocate for more positions like mine, as well as to integrate that skillset into the history curriculum. The demand is there, and the task is critical to our institutions.

**How can universities and offices within the federal government doing historical work identify opportunities for collaboration with each other?**

Another great question. It’s a challenge because we each are in our own bubbles. Washingtonians and federal employees can easily become engulfed by the all-consuming nature of politics. Universities can also be insular; the college campus can feel cut-off from the wider world, and the demands on faculty to publish, teach, research and do service can be all-encompassing. I think meaningful collaborations begin with networking and relationship-building. That means being purposeful about getting out of bubbles, attending conferences, meeting peers, and finding common ground. Centers such as the Lepage Center can be facilitators of these connections, and we would love to work with SHFG to make more of them possible.

**Finally, what is your favorite aspect of your duties?**

Two things: mentorship and coalition-building. We have two student fellows at the Lepage Center, and I love watching them grow and learn through the Center’s work. They’ve become sophisticated thinkers and communicators, and I couldn’t be prouder of how they’ve embraced the challenges we’ve thrown at them. As

for coalition-building, we’ve been very deliberate in forging connections with organizations across the country, including SHFG, the American Historical Association, National History Center, National Council on Public History, American Association for State and Local History, Organization of American Historians, Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, Foreign Policy Research Institute, the Wilson Center, the Luskin Center, the Miller Center and many others. Some of these organizations are beginning to formally bond together into a consortium that can address major challenges inside and outside the profession. There is tremendous collective strength among these organizations. If we join forces, we can make a real difference.

## The Tenth Blount Postal History Symposium

November 1-2, 2018

National Postal Museum, Smithsonian Institution  
Washington DC

**Theme of the Symposium:  
WWI and its Immediate Aftermath**

**Sponsored by  
the American Philatelic Society,  
the American Philatelic Research Library,  
and the Smithsonian National Postal Museum**

Wrought from militarism, nationalism and imperialism, the Great War broke empires, challenged established gender and race relations, and destroyed millions of lives. Mail became the critical link for the families separated and desperate for news. Governments responded to these developments and the disruption of communication networks, and struggled to determine who should be able to communicate with whom and about what.

From India to the United States, from England to China, and from Palestine to Chile; much of the world will be covered in the scheduled paper presentations and philatelic exhibits. Likewise, the topics will vary widely from the postal workplace to logistics, from propaganda to censorship, and from funding the war to adapting to shortages. A public lecture on World War I letters will be held on the night of October 31. Curator-led visits to the exhibition *My Fellow Soldiers* will also be offered during the symposium.

To register to attend one or two full days, please visit <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/research/symposiums-and-lectures/>. Space is limited. A full schedule will be available by mid-September after all speakers are confirmed.