The Risks of Professionalizing Local History: The Campaign to Suppress My Book

Robert R. Weyeneth, University of South Carolina

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by Robert R. Weyenth, weyenet@vm.sc.edu

When colleagues heard about efforts to suppress publication of my most recent book, they were surprised and sympathetic, but they were incredulous when I told them that the subject was Honolulu's "Central Park." How, they wondered, could a history of an urban park in Hawaii be controversial? It was hard to imagine a more innocuous topic.

In its barest outlines, the story of the manuscript and its critics is simple. Two years ago I was contacted by a non-profit preservation society about expanding the consultant's report I had written in 1991 into a book that it would publish. I was asked to write a final chapter to bring the history of Kapi'olani Park to the present and to revise the original report as appropriate, while the society would contract with a graphic designer to add historical and contemporary images. I had long believed I had discovered unknown stories in the history of the park, so the project seemed ideal for getting my scholarly text to a broad audience in an attractive format. The book, all hoped, would encourage appreciation of this historic green space that stretched from Waikiki Beach to Diamond Head.

Last summer, as I finished incorporating readers' comments into the manuscript, my life took a detour into the world of legal intimidation, when phone calls brought news about threats of libel suits. While scholars routinely put their research on the line when they deliver papers at conferences, I suddenly found myself pondering whether I was willing to defend my work in a very different adversarial setting, the courtroom. I stood firm about my research and the conclusions to which it had led me, and to the credit of the leadership of the society Kapi'olani Park: A History reached bookstores in December 2002.

The campaign to suppress the book illustrates some of the obstacles and risks that professional historians encounter when we write community history. As part of a standard review process prior to publication, I had received a number of suggestions from local people kind enough to read the manuscript with a critical eye, and I carefully evaluated every comment. Most useful were comments on recent events from reviewers who were participants with first-hand knowledge. Less reliable were reviewer observations about the distant past. I trusted my own assessment of the historical record when readers offered dubious evidence.

The Power of Local Myth

Although interest in local history runs deep, the quality of this history is highly variable because community history is often rooted in lore and legend. The critical apparatus, contextual knowledge, and outsider perspective of professional historians commonly lead us to conclusions that challenge local assumptions.

In my case, local lore maintained that the King of Hawaii established Kapi'olani Park in the

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1870s as a public park for his subjects. I discovered the
story was more complex and not so democratically inclusive:
members of the king’s court had developed the site as a
fashionable seaside suburb. For its first twenty years it was
a private preserve for the homes of the few, the rich, and the
well-born, set amid carriage roads and a horse racing track.
Critics, including some Native Hawaiians, were unhappy
with my analysis of the self-interested origins of the park.

The Allure of Ancestor Worship
Local history is frequently the story of founding families
and, as a consequence, descendants play influential roles
in writing and defending the master narrative of community
history. My research caused me to reevaluate not only the
origins of the park but also the
legacy of an Englishman regarded
locally as a park benefactor. This
well-connected businessman had
orchestrated a complex real estate
deal that had actually diminished
the size of the park in the 1890s
by converting leases on prime
oceanfront lots to fee simple ownership for some of
the leading men in Hawaii. Although the effort to recover
these “lost lots” became a familiar theme of the park’s
twentieth-century history, descendants were not pleased
to hear the explanation for how they were lost.

Local Intimidation
Because history matters to communities and families, the
desire to control the meaning of the past can lead to the
doors of law firms, especially when descendants enjoy access
to influence and attorneys. Descendants may mobilize legal
talent on behalf of local legend and ancestral reputation,
as happened when portions of my manuscript were attacked
as “libelous.” Even the most dedicated historian convinced
that his research is solid and his interpretation reasonable
will contemplate with discomfort the prospect of taking
the time—and spending the money—to enter the legal fray.

History Is Inconvenient
Much of this is fairly familiar terrain for historians working
in the trenches of public history. One unusual circumstance
in my situation was the legal status of the non-profit
preservation society. In the 1980s the Hawaii Supreme Court
had resurrected a century-old trust and ruled that its terms
should henceforth govern the management and use
of Kapi‘olani Park. This ruling had been a significant victory
for the society because the park had given it legal standing
to play a watchdog role in park affairs. Inconveniently, though,
my research raised questions about how the park had been
used in the past, seemingly in violation of trust restrictions.

Some members of the society argued that my book should not
be published because it revealed a past at odds with what they
wanted to believe had been the park’s history. They worried
that publication of my research would compromise future legal
positions that the society might take on behalf of protecting
the modern park. Although the book begins with a preface
and an introduction that distance the society from my
conclusions, this format did not mollify critics.

Historians in the Headlines
As the intimidation continued, one academic colleague
suggested there might be a wider context. Over the last few
years the public has learned about the ethical transgressions
of a small but disturbing number of high-profile historians.
Although my Honolulu critics believed they had plenty of specific
complaints about my work without needing to diagnose a universal
problem, one wonders if some of the objections were nourished by
suspicions about our profession in general.

In the long run, one hopes that the genuine
passion that inspires local history can be
joined with the honest spirit of inquiry that
animates the historical profession.

Basic Assumptions Aren’t So Basic
In the course of responding to correspondence and legal
briefs that characterized my manuscript as full of “opinions,”
I realized that attorneys, as well as the general public, have
little understanding of the interpretive nature of history
or how professional historians actually work: how we ask
questions about sources and points of view, how we analyze
texts and try to think critically about them, how we rely on
contextual knowledge of a period or place, how we seek to
draw reasonable inferences from the evidence at hand, and
how an interpretation is eventually crafted. We know that
there can be multiple and conflicting interpretations of
events and that no historical interpretation is final.

Perhaps the biggest challenge confronting professional
historians is explaining to public audiences how we know
what we think we know about the past. In the long run,
one hopes that the genuine passion that inspires local
history can be joined with the honest spirit of inquiry
that animates the historical profession.

Robert R. Weyeneth is Professor of History and Co-Director
of the Public History Program at the University of South Carolina.
Before coming to USC he was on the faculty at the University
of Hawaii. The book is distributed by Native Books, 1244
North School Street, Honolulu, HI 96734; 800-887-7751;
nativebk@lava.net