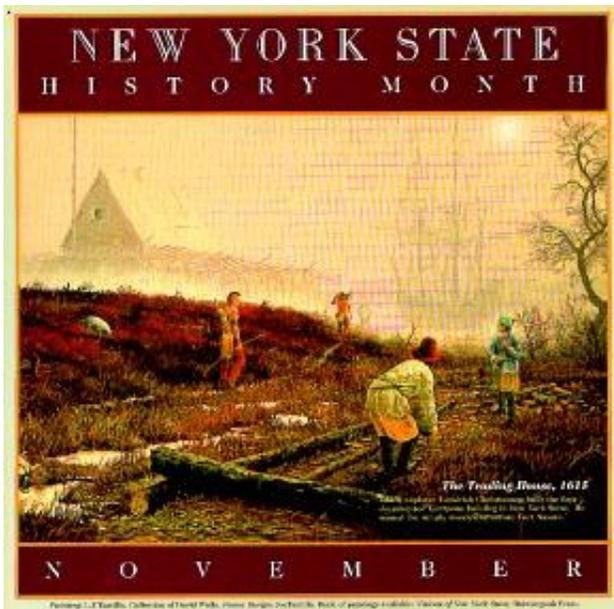


# Bob Weible: Is NYS History Month Dead?

By [Robert Weible](#) on [October 22, 2013](#)



It's true. November is New York State History Month.

In 1997, New York's legislature added [Section 57.02](#) to the state's Arts and Cultural Affairs Law and 1) designated November as New York State History Month, 2) defined the purpose of the month as the celebration of state history and the recognition of the contributions of state and local historians, and 3) authorized the Education Department to undertake projects to recognize the month (while the legislation failed to identify any specific projects, it did suggest student essay contests as one possibility).

Initially, the idea of a state history month drew support, not only from the Education Department, but also from the

New York State Historical Association, the New York State Writers Institute, the New York State Library Association, and the New York State Regional Publishers Association (apparently the main proponent of the initiative; Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., publisher of the *New York Times*, was actually among the first to promote the history month idea).

Once State History Month became a reality, there were a few lecture series featuring local and regional authors (in Albany in 1997 and other years, for example, in the Catskill Mountains and Hudson Valley Region in 2000, in Saratoga and Cooperstown in 2002); public programs in Elmira and Schenectady; and even an Ulster County celebration of folklorist Alf Evers in 2001 (featuring speeches by a long list of friends—from Congressman Maurice Hinchey to Beat poet and musician Ed Sanders—and music by Jay Ungar and Molly Mason). The University at Albany chose November as the month in which to host its annual conference "Researching New York," and the New York State Archives Partnership Trust decided to sponsor yearly November ceremonies to honor a growing list of distinguished historians, including Doris Kearns Goodwin, Robert Caro, and Ken Burns. There were even [yearly posters](#) from 1997 to 2002.

By and large, however, enthusiasm for state history month waned after 2002. In fact, it had become something of a memory by the time I began my tenure as State Historian in 2008. I only learned about the program after Bruce Dearstyne posted a piece about it [here on the New York History Blog in 2012](#). Bruce listed some interest-

ing ideas for reviving the program, but there was little response.

So now the question arises: is State History Month a dead issue?

And the answer is “of course not.” We just need to give the matter some thought.

My own sense is that the idea of a state history month was always the means to an end and that the bigger issue then, as now, was the need raise New Yorkers’ appreciation of the value and power of their history.

Historians appreciate history, of course, but many seem to believe that only historians truly value and understand the meaning of the past. Some even act as though their mastery of history—or their love for it—entitles them to the attention, respect, and support of people who may not think of themselves as historians.

This needs to change—in New York, as elsewhere.

As Carl Becker wrote all those years ago, every person really is his or her own historian. And yet so many of us still miss that point, and we talk and work, mainly among ourselves, whether as university scholars, historic preservationists, local historians, teachers, archivists, genealogists, or museum professionals.

The fact is that to many of us have convinced ourselves that things are just fine the way they are, and have settled for the accolades, awards, and positions we give each other in our various professional organizations. Often, we even assume that people outside our historical groups don’t know or care about history, just because they don’t join our societies or attend our conferences.

That’s a mistake.

Most people like—even love—history and use it in their daily lives. History is not only interesting to people, it’s important. It’s the bad history teaching, the overly specialized and inaccessible writing, and the boring and uninspired programming that turn so many people off. There is, in other words, an enormous audience out there just waiting to work with us.

And no, New York State History Month doesn’t have to fade away. Its fate really depends on us. Let’s begin, not by figuring out how to make this initiative work for us, but how we can make it work for everyone. This means, to me at least, that we’ll need to work together with open minds, vision, and a renewed sense of public service to teach everyday New Yorkers that they can make history as well as celebrate it.

This is certainly easier said than done. It requires patience, tolerance, determination, and perhaps even a sense of adventure. So in the coming months, I am hoping we can continue the dialogue we began last spring in Cooperstown when the leaders of New York’s various historical organizations came together and recognized that we can make more progress together than on our own.

New York's history community is large and diverse. It has more power than many of us recognize. But it's up to us—and no one else—to find a way to realize that power. Together, we can live up to our responsibilities, and we really can make a difference.



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### About Robert Weible

Robert Weible is the State Historian of New York. The resources of the state's museum, library, and archives are available online

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### One thought on “Bob Weible: Is NYS History Month Dead?”



Gene Porter

October 23, 2013 at 10:04 AM

This is an excellent challenge to revitalize an import initiative. I particularly like the acknowledgement that we each have and make our own history, and that our personal history is enriched when connected to the enormously interesting larger web of history throughout the State.

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