

# THE ALMOST NONEXISTENT HISTORY OF ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS

James M. Banner, Jr.

Last spring a large group of historians, aspiring and experienced alike, gathered in Princeton's department of history for a set of lively panel discussions about the department's post-World War II history, its present situation, and its possible future. Because few departments in any discipline have taken an institutional interest in preserving and understanding their own pasts, a workshop about its own history immediately distinguished the Princeton department from most other history departments. But what invites particular note in this instance is that the workshop's organizers were not members of the department's faculty but instead a group of the department's graduate students.<sup>1</sup>

Those students' interest in their department's history originated in a chance realization that, though students of the past, they were ignorant of the past of the very institution in which they were preparing to become professional historians. That discovery occurred when one of them happened across a 1987 *New York Times* article on "The Hot History Department," a lively if lopsided and seriously incomplete account of one of the most influential groups of historians then practicing at an American university.<sup>2</sup> The irony of fledgling historians not knowing much about the historical context of their own training was not lost on those students. But it seems to be an irony that had also long escaped the members of the department who were directing their studies.

I can write in a critical vein about this episode and its implications because I am a guilty party myself (as well as a participant in the workshop).<sup>3</sup> Before 1987, I had been a member of the Princeton department and was thus as responsible as my colleagues—some now retired or deceased, some still active—for a failure of professional as well as historical responsibility. I, too, had done nothing to further the written record of my own department, nor had I made any effort to introduce my graduate students to the history of the particular departmental culture they had entered. Unfortunately, the charge of inattention to department histories can validly be leveled against most other historians. For while you would think that historians, of all people, would take an interest in the history of their own institutions—in the history of the departments in which they practice, in the preservation and interpretation of that history, and in such matters as the traditions that form and sustain their collective approach to preparing others—they rarely do so. At least they rarely do so in a way that would prove useful to the advancement of knowledge, to the preparation of their students, and to the orientation of those who succeed them as members of their depart-

ments.<sup>4</sup> But more is at stake here than the absence of histories of history departments. In fact, we have almost no histories of any academic departments, most significantly of the great ones in the major disciplines. That fact, the reasons for it, and some suggestions as

Academics are practiced in, sometimes champions of, gossip. They nourish themselves on intramural disputes, on information about their colleagues, on battles over appointments.

to what might be done to alter the situation are the subject of what follows.

Academic historians are caught—some would say entrapped—in the intellectual sociology of their discipline. For generations, their professional preference has derived from their success in creating knowledge in the major subject areas long central to their discipline: originally politics, institutions, statecraft, and foreign relations, more recently the many subfields of social, intellectual, and cultural history. The history of education and of educational institutions has not been foremost among any of those, nor has been the kind of intellectual history that might have grown out of it (the history of academic thought, for example). Academic biographies and memoirs, as well as histories of discrete colleges and universities, have been left to carry much of the weight of academic history, but few of these reveal much about the departments in which their authors have served. Department histories are almost nowhere to be found.

Why this is so is not hard to discern. Institutional history has been at a general discount in recent decades. The history of education has never found a strong place in history departments. Those aspiring historians seeking entry to graduate programs, even those with a nascent interest in the history of education, have not been without good sense in defining their interests to graduate program admissions committees as being, say, in the social history of ideas if they are interested in academic culture or, say, in the history of the social composition of academic faculties or student cohorts if they have a general interest in academic institutions. Those of their mentors who might wish it were otherwise, who would like to see students pursue the history of academic departments—and there are a few, even if very few, of these—have found it a losing game to try to attract

their students to such subjects. It is thus a distinctive and hardy student who proposes to undertake a dissertation on the history of a university department in any discipline.

Two other forces are at work against the pursuit of departmental histories. One is the simple fact that institutions do not have memories; only their members and employees do. If faculty members fail to take an interest in their histories, academic departments are not likely to be the subject of institutional histories. The histories of departments are carried within their members' memories, not within the institutions themselves; once their members resign or retire, the history they embody leaves the department with them. Only concerted efforts to capture and preserve those memories can

avail.

But a second reality working against department histories is the disposition of most faculty members toward their own departments and colleagues. Academics are practiced in, sometimes champions of, gossip. They nourish themselves on intramural disputes, on information about their colleagues, on battles over appointments. That is generally all to the good, for if kept within collegial bounds, gossip and inside information are constituent parts of the equilibrating mechanisms of all institutions. But in this case, private knowledge gained and imparted through gossip stands in for formal historical knowledge and is not recorded or caught on paper or tape as a resource for formal future histories unless it happens to be set down in personal correspondence or diaries that find themselves into library collections. If not, that knowledge is allowed to vanish into air and thus be of no use to future historians.

This does not however mean that nothing is available to those who might be interested in the histories of individual departments. Some information can be found in the written histories of particular colleges and universities. But those seeking knowledge of particular segments of those institutions, especially of their constituent academic departments, are at a serious disadvantage. One can, for instance, tease out some of the history of the University of Wisconsin's history department from David S. Brown's *Beyond the Frontier: The Midwestern Voice in American Historical Writing* (University of Chicago Press, 2009) and of the Berkeley history department from Albert L. Hurtado's *Herbert Eugene Bolton: Historian of the American Borderlands* (University of California Press, 2012). The Berkeley department is also one of the very few to have something that can be said to constitute a sketch of its history in Gene A. Brucker, Henry F. May, and David A. Hollinger's three lectures, collected in *His-*

tory at Berkeley: *A Dialog in Three Parts* (Institute of Governmental Studies, 1998). Memoirs are also the source of often tantalizing information about particular departments.<sup>5</sup> The sole attempt to capture part of the 20th-century history of some of the major history departments in the United States is William Palmer's *From Gentleman's Club to Professional Body: The Evolution of the History Department in the United States, 1940-1980*.<sup>6</sup> A set of discrete essays about seven major departments, Palmer's book outlines, in vivid and illuminating detail, the basic elements of each department's history and of the influences of its major figures over roughly a half-century since the onset of World War II. Yet while even these few works are welcome elements of a slim literature, they scarcely constitute authoritative, in-depth histories of any single history department.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, in thinking about department histories, why should we stop with history departments only? It would be a substantial addition to knowledge about ideas and the history of education generally to have histories of the great departments in all the disciplines. Would we not learn much about American letters, literary scholarship, and criticism from a history of the Yale English department in the 20th century?<sup>8</sup> What about histories of, say, the sociology departments of Columbia, the University of Michigan, and the University of Chicago, the economics department of MIT, the history and philosophy departments of Harvard, the mathematics and physics departments of Princeton, and the archaeology department of the University of Pennsylvania? Others will have additional candidate departments, all of them surely worthy of written histories. We should have those histories.

It is not difficult to imagine how these might be written. First, of course, would come the entirely conventional methods of historical scholarship—research into departmental records, into the collections of faculty members deposited in libraries, and into the archives of the universities that contain them. But such efforts would not suffice to capture the full realities of any department. So here I return to the initiative of the Princeton history graduate students who organized last spring's workshop, which they intended as an occasion to begin a conversation about the department's past, present, and future. True to their vocation as people who preserve as well as interpret the past, they started by videotaping the panel discussions they had organized. But they had already undertaken something more significant: interviews with a few retired members of the department. Note, again, that it is they, not their teachers, who had undertaken these interviews (and who will undertake more of them). Such interviews, it seems to me, hold great promise both for the history of departments and for the preparation of aspiring scholars, above all of historians.

Oral history embodies more than mere interviews. The best oral history is produced out of deep knowledge of the topic that is the subject of an interview. The best oral history requires well-practiced interviewers. And for both professional and legal

purposes, the best oral history requires adherence to demanding ethical standards. These elements—knowledge, practice, and ethics—ought by now to constitute part of every history graduate student's preparation. Why not apply at least part of that preparation to the capture of a department's history? There should be exit interviews with retiring and departing



Columbia University, ca. 1903. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

faculty members of the sort done with departing senior corporate and government officials as well as retrospective interviews, some years later, of the same people. And why not exit interviews of graduate students themselves?

Why don't departments routinely encourage their members to retain their files and correspondence and to deposit them with their institutions? The yield could be enormous as well as captivating, as shown by Peter Novick's use of such collections in his classic *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge University Press, 1988). It would also be no mere trifle were departments to improve their own efforts toward their alumni, both faculty members and students. Graduate students have a wealth of impressions, information, and knowledge to impart to the historical record, as do former faculty members. It would be fitting for departments to keep track of them. Departments are not known for doing a good job on either score, although they can be excused for not wanting to add yet another task, that of alumni relations, to their already taxed staffs. Yet any department interested in preserving its history will want to be as inclusive as possible in doing so.

The Princeton students' interest in the history of their department that occasions these reflections ought to serve as a proxy for all historians concerned with the history of their discipline, their institutions, and their intellectual culture. If their initiative, for which they should be applauded, can spur the rest of us to undertake what we might long ago have undertaken, they will have inaugurated a new field of research as well as a new phase in the history of history, as well as of many other disciplines, in the United States.

*James M. Banner, Jr., is the author most recently of Being a Historian: An Introduction to the Professional World of History (Cambridge University Press, 2012). He was a member of the Princeton history department from 1966 to 1980.*

<sup>1</sup> They were Maeve H. Glass, Sarah C. Matherly, Maribel Morey, Patrick Luiz S. De Oliveira, and Kalyani Ramnath. Maeve Glass and Maribel Morey have commented on a draft of this essay, as has David Kyvig. Michael Les Benedict has also offered a useful lead. I am grateful to them all.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Silk, "The Hot History Department," *New York Times*, April 19, 1987. It should be noted that the author, then a reporter for the *Atlanta Constitution* is now a professor of religion at Trinity College and holds a Ph.D. in medieval history from Harvard. While his article must be read with many grains of salt, it was the work of someone who knew what he was looking for and could write about it with knowledge and wit.

<sup>3</sup> The other panelists were Jean-Christophe Agnew, David Bell, David Cannadine, Robert Darnton, Hendrik Hartog, Stanley N. Katz, Susan Naquin, Philip Nord, Martha Sandweiss, and Mark Silk.

<sup>4</sup> Though historians will not like to be reminded of the fact, it turns out that many corporations succeed where academics fail. Many companies have commissioned histories of themselves and provided those histories to newly hired officers to orient them to the institutions they are joining. Their example invites emulation.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the memoirs collected in James M. Banner, Jr., and John R. Gillis, *Becoming Historians* (University of Chicago Press, 2009). Many other academic memoirs, especially book-length ones, serve the same purpose. And why should there not be histories of the many nonacademic historical institutions in which historians serve?

<sup>6</sup> Privately published, Marshall University, 2008. An addendum of sorts to this book is William Palmer's "Piranhas, Whales, and Guppies: Transforming the History Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1965-1985," *The Historian* 75 (2013): 306-328. Palmer is also the author of a related work: *Engagement with the Past: The Lives and Works of the World War II Generation of Historians* (University of Kentucky Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> A full literature search would no doubt turn up unknown, unpublished department histories. Michael Les Benedict has pointed out to me that Francis P. Weisenburger, a long-time member of the Ohio State University history department and author of a multivolume history of that university, also wrote *A Brief History of the History Department of the Ohio State University* (Ohio State University Press, 1969). A hint from David Kyvig has helped me identify Walter Jon Heddesheimer, "The Study and Teaching of History in the United States Prior to 1940 with a Special Reference to the Ohio State University," (Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, 1974). Maribel Morey argues that Laura Kalman's histories of the Yale Law School, while not department histories, are of analogous significance. See *Legal Realism at Yale, 1927-1960* (University of North Carolina Press, 1986) and *Yale Law School and the Sixties: Revolt and Reverberations* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> A fine introduction to that subject is Mark Royden Winchell, *Cleath Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (University of Virginia Press, 1996). Yet as a biography, it only hints at the realities of Brooks's department. The savory aspects of that history were brought home to me in a conversation one day in the 1980s with Brooks, who had been an undergraduate teacher of mine. We were speaking of the value of a history of his department, from which he had by then retired. "Surely," I ventured to him, "it would be important to know how we got from William Lyon Phelps to you, Robert Penn Warren, René Wellek, and William K. Wimsatt and then to Paul De Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Harold Bloom. Someone had to have voted for them." With a sly grin and a twinkle in his eye behind his thick glasses, in his soft southern voice Brooks replied, "I didn't." I have since then tried to convince Winchell and others to write a history of that department but to no avail. I continue to think that such a history would make a major contribution to knowledge.