

## Taking Business History Public

Peter Liebhold 1, Laura Linard 2, Stephen Mihm 3, Philip Scranton 4

1°: National Museum of American History, The Smithsonian Institution

2°: Baker Library Special Collections, Harvard Business School

3 : University of Georgia

4 : Department of History, Rutgers University - [Website](#)

---

Organizer: Philip Scranton, Rutgers University, USA Participants: Stephen Mihm, University of Georgia; Peter Liebhold, National Museum of American History, The Smithsonian Institution; Philip Scranton, Rutgers University. Moderator: To Be Arranged Overview: In North America, public history has become a growing specialization outside the traditional academic domains of teaching and research within higher education. Its practitioners work in archives, museums, film development groups, research centers, and for-profit businesses. They undertake to deliver historical insights and the results of professional research to wider audiences than customarily read scholarly books and journals, attend college and university classes, or travel to small theatres to see historical documentary films. Public historians aim to reach tens and hundreds of thousands of museum visitors, or millions through video/television programming or active/interactive websites with a historical focus and interpretation. This panel presents three US business historians active in taking our discipline's historical research into the public domain: Stephen Mihm, Peter Liebhold, and Philip Scranton, in a discussion that both outlines contemporary American practice and invites commentary, criticism, and both supplementary and counter examples from European public presentations of business history, in whatever forms. The proposers believe that if business history is to develop further reach and sophistication, the discipline needs to open dialogues about its links to multiple publics and with citizens, consumers, and others who form these publics. This forum represents an occasion to explore such possibilities. NOTE: If web-access facilities are available, each of the presenters will go online to bring elements of their work products "into the room."

**I. Stephen Mihm**, associate professor of history at the University of Georgia, will discuss his work editing the "Echoes" blog on economic and business history that is hosted at Bloomberg.com. This blog, which pays academics and other experts to contribute posts on business history, is a novel attempt to translate academic insights for a general audience. Mihm will discuss the challenges and rewards of the undertaking, and speculate on how similar projects might be launched elsewhere. An important dimension of this effort is that it is linked to, indeed sponsored by, a profit-making media corporation with global reach. It is fairly common in the US for academic research to be distributed to larger publics through non-profit institutions, but building a segment of a major commercial website for the

dissemination of scholarly research findings is rare and particularly intriguing as a potential model for generating public value from academic studies.

**II. Peter Liebhold**, National Museum of American History, will explore the processes through which a major national-scale exhibition in Washington, DC, has been conceptualized and operationalized, an effort remarkable not least because of its curators outreach to seek participation from citizens across the United States. Professionalism combines with public involvement to shape the contours of interpretation in this innovative undertaking.

*American Enterprise – An Exhibition: Stories of American Business*

The National Museum of American History is planning an important new exhibition that will examine the business and consumer history of the United States from the 1770s to the 2010s. *American Enterprise* will present the benefits, failures, and unanticipated consequences of American economic development. Visitors will learn how business and work has affected the nation's history as well as their own lives. They will see the dynamic tension between capitalism and democracy and understand how opportunity, innovation, competition, and the common good comprise the building blocks of America's business.

Chronological in organization, the 8,000 sq. ft. *American Enterprise* will use objects and graphics to examine how the United States moved from being a small dependent nation to being one of the world's most vibrant and trend setting economies. The exhibition will focus on stories from the areas of agriculture, finance, information technology and communication, retail and service, and manufacturing. The ongoing transformation of the American experience has provided opportunities for many, great benefits for some, and hardships for others. Understanding the business development of the nation, and the corresponding social effects, is fundamental to the lives of the American people, the history of the United States, and the nation's role in global affairs. *American Enterprise* will convey the drama, breadth, and diversity of America's business heritage.

The exhibition is being developed in consultation with academic scholars, business experts, concerned stakeholders and the general public. Committed to “learning in public” the team is seeking wide input from a variety of sources. To date the team has held two invitational symposiums and has created a developmental website at <http://americanenterprise.si.edu/> The website allows members of the public, academics, and special interest groups see the latest developments of the exhibition plans and make comments. Additionally the exhibition team has established collaborations with major universities (Brown University, American University, University of South Carolina, University of Texas El Paso, and others) to assist in developing content.

**III. Philip Scranton**, “This Week in the Great Depression”: Leaning Forward in Time as History Unfolds -- Philip Scranton, a senior historian of business and technology, is under contract to write a weekly column for Bloomberg Echoes, focusing on everyday events and major crises that blossomed, day by day, eighty years ago during the Great Depression. Taking a global view, but placing his main emphasis on US happenings, Scranton is consulting primary sources, contemporary newspapers and journals, and

scholarly studies to craft a series of 500-word re-visits to 1932. Each of them relates then-current understandings of what had caused the crash, why it was being so resistant to recovery, what prospects for government and business community action seemed plausible, etc. These are not columns which present a finished interpretation from the 2010s, but offer instead contingent and incomplete stories, often in the words of actors who, looking forward into the mists, had no idea about how the next month or year in politics, economy, and society would emerge. Visual materials are a key element of their presentation; wherever feasible, 1930s newsreels and other film on each week's topic can be accessed through embedded links. As of this writing, sixteen columns have been completed; by the time the EBHA begins, there will be nearly forty.

## **ADDITION TO Panel Proposal - Taking Business History Public**

**Laura Linard, Harvard Business School, a fourth speaker**

### **Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School**

Laura Linard, Director of Historical Collections Baker Library, Harvard Business School will discuss the work of the Library's Outreach Program. Unique among business school libraries, Baker Library possesses extraordinarily comprehensive and diverse historical collections. Built over time with a consistent focus on the evolution of business and industry, the depth and scope of these collections are exceptional. Since the establishment of Harvard Business School in 1908, Baker Library has collected archival collections and rare books to better understand the important theories, organizations, movements, and individuals that have shaped the business world today.

Baker Library Historical Collections' specialized mission and targeted collection strategy ensure that materials - that might not otherwise be available- are preserved and made accessible. As an integral member of the Harvard University research and teaching community; the Baker Library Historical Collections Outreach Program serves university, national, and international constituencies including those faculty who teach the history of capitalism and business history at institutions around the world.

The focus of the Outreach Program is to reach the global teaching and learning community including business practitioners. Launched in 2006, the goals of the Baker Library Outreach Program are to produce innovative and creative exhibitions that explore the links between events in the past to contemporary issues and situations and the insights that can be gained from this study. The program also develops publications, both print and web, that accompany each exhibition that allow for a more in-depth study of the themes introduced in the exhibitions.

Recent exhibitions have included:

***Railroads and the Transformation of Capitalism-*** <http://www.library.hbs.edu/hc/railroads/> which explores the continuing research in the history and role of railroads in creating not only the foundations of modern business, but also a system of modern capitalism that survives to this day.

***Buy Now: Pay Later: A History of Personal Credit*** <http://www.library.hbs.edu/hc/credit/> was produced at a time when the subject of the extent of personal credit was a constant topic in the current business press. Caitlin Anderson, the guest curator, in introducing the exhibit wrote “There is a myth of a lost golden age of economic virtue. ... But credit itself is as old as commerce. Though credit is not new, it is newly visible. Credit has moved from the fringes of the economy to the very center.”

***The High Art of Photographic Advertising*** <http://www.library.hbs.edu/hc/naai/> introduces a collection of photographs originally produced in 1934 that reflect, years later, a crucial time in the perceptions of photography's artistic, commercial, and cultural significance.

Each exhibit web site is a contained subject site with clear themes and sub-themes and includes links to many additional resources on the subject for those who wish to learn more. The Outreach Program is one way to strengthen the ties between Harvard Business School, Harvard University, and scholars and practitioners around the world who share an interest in the study of business history.

### **Laura Linard**

Laura Linard is the Director of Historical Collections for Baker Library, Harvard Business School. She administers and directs all activities of the Historical Collections Department including developing and managing the manuscript, archival and rare book collections and providing reference and research services. Ms. Linard is a member of the Senior Management Team for Baker Library and the Senior Leadership Team for the special collections community for Harvard University Library.

Since assuming the position of Director of Historical Collections in 1996, the focus of Ms. Linard's attention has been on integrating historical collections materials and services into the teaching and learning at Harvard University and reaching out to the broader business history community as well as utilizing technology more effectively in creating greater knowledge of and access to the many varied collections.

At Harvard University, Ms. Linard has actively participated in and chaired many Baker Library and Harvard University Committees. Ms. Linard has served on several Rare Book and Manuscript, American Library Association committees. She has given presentations to a wide array of audiences.

Ms. Linard received her B.A. in American History/Government from Beloit College in Beloit, Wisconsin. She received her M.S. in Library Service from Columbia University, New York City where she participated in the Rare Book Program