Alumni Spotlight: Emily Wheeler

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Emily Wheeler

Utah State University introduces history alumna and history instructor, Emily Wheeler. Graduating with her first master’s degree in history in 2005, she obtained a second master’s in landscape architecture in 2008, saying, “It sounds like a really weird combination, but it actually meshed really well with what I was interested in doing.” Since then, Emily has worked in several sectors of the history field, including history writing and historic preservation. Emily currently writes historic fiction and has recently co-authored No Peace with the Dawn with fellow alumnus Jeffrey Bateman. On the topic of writing fiction, she said, “I think a lot of people have this prejudice against history, saying, ‘Oh, it’s just dry facts’, but if you read a well-researched historical novel, it comes to life. This is about people; it is not about boring names and dates.”

Aside from her current work, Emily is passionate about local sustainability and community gardens. “Having a garden in your back yard isn’t going to solve all of your problems,” she says, “but it does make a big difference.” She is also a strong believer in the preservation of historic architecture.

Our edited interview is below.

I graduated twice from USU because I got two master’s degrees here. The first time was 2005 with a degree in history, and the second was in 2010 with a degree in landscape architecture.

How did you go from history to landscape architecture?

I got the degree in history and was deciding where I wanted to go with it. At the time the landscape architecture program had a focus on historic and cultural landscapes, and that was something I was interested in—the history of landscapes and historic preservation, as well as how we shape our spaces and how these spaces impact us. The degree gave me the qualifications to do some historic preservation work as well. It sounds like a really weird combination, but it worked out really well.

What was your favorite part of being a student at Utah State University?

I loved the people that I worked with—the students and especially the professors. My master’s degree was focused on early modern Europe, and USU has a lot of great professors in that area to work with. Even though I am now studying a lot more American history that’s where my interest was at the beginning.

When and how did you first develop in interest in history?

In my senior year in high school I was in AP British literature, and it was this class that helped me realize that all these stories were about real people. We had to know the historical background in order to understand some of the literature we were reading. Following that, I took history classes and had good professors who made history about more than just dates and facts.

How has your career progressed since your time as a student?

When I started the degree in landscape architecture, the program was begging people to graduate early because we were in such high demand. When I finished the program, the great recession had just hit and funding for most projects dried up. I was able to find some work for
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historic preservation projects. I also got to work with the national park service on a few projects, and I was working with the anthropology museum here. I ended up getting into novel writing because there just weren’t good jobs, and so I thought, “Well, I’ve always wanted to write fiction.”

Do you plan to do more historical fiction writing? What about Co-authoring?

I’m planning on writing more fiction. I wouldn’t object to co-authoring again, but the circumstances with Jeff worked out where we both had the same interest. If I ran into that situation again I would do it again, but I’ve also heard nightmare stories about people trying to co-author.

How do you feel that your history, classics, or religious studies training at Utah State University has helped you in your career? Are there any specific skills that have been useful to you?

Well, there is the obvious: it gave me the background in history and taught me how to do research. I think that is actually the biggest thing. When I am teaching undergraduate classes, the biggest thing I want them to walk away with is that they learn how to research, how to think critically, and how to make connections between things.

Is there an article, movie, blog, or book which inspired you that you recommend to others?

I am a big fan of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. I like how she takes little pieces of history and digs down and pulls a story out. She wrote a book called Well Behaved Women Seldom Make History that I’m excited to read.

What are you passionate about, other than history?

I’m very interested in issues of sustainability, especially local sustainability and community gardens. Having a garden in your back yard isn’t going to solve all of your problems, but it does make a big difference. I’m also interested in historic preservation too. When they tore the Art Barn down I cried because I was involved in trying to preserve it.

What are your hobbies?

When I have time for hobbies, I am into music, especially folk music. I play the folk-harp and the dulcimer. It’s nice because I know it’s not something I’m ever going to be good at, so there is no pressure to prepare for a performance. I’m just having fun. And obviously I like to read.

If interested individuals want to follow you on social media or find you on the web, what is a good website or twitter handle for you?

I’m most active on my Facebook author page: E.B. Wheeler. And I am also on twitter @eb_wheeler.