

LET US TELL YOU ABOUT NERWHA

The New England Regional World History Association (NERWHA), an independent affiliate of the international World History Association, exists to advance scholarship, teaching, and the public understanding of world history throughout New England. Its mission statement sums up the essence of and purpose behind this organization:

The New England Regional World History Association supports and works to advance scholarship and teaching within a trans-national, trans-regional, and trans-cultural perspective. Through the researchers, teachers, students, independent scholars, and authors who are its members, NERWHA fosters historical analysis undertaken not from the viewpoint of nation-states, discrete regions, or particular cultures, but from that of the human community. To this end, NERWHA supports a number of academic and pedagogical activities and forms of outreach, including semi-annual symposia, held respectively in the Spring and Autumn. At these symposia researchers and teachers assemble to discuss both the most recent research and developments in the field and ways in which these breakthroughs can be integrated into the classroom at all levels, K-20.

World history is as old as the putative “fathers of history,” Herodotus (fl. 450 BCE), Sima Qian (d. after 91 BCE), and the authors of the Pentateuch (sixth century BCE?). Each attempted to place the history of a particular people--Greeks, Chinese, and Israelites—into a far larger context, the context of the world as he knew and understood it. Beginning, however, in the latter half of the twentieth century, a new historiographical tradition emerged known as the New World History. Contemporary enthusiasm for world history initially blossomed in the United States in the aftermath of World War II and the Cold War that followed. People in the United States now realized that isolationism was no longer possible or desirable. Consequently, interest in learning about other cultures and the interactions between societies led to an increasing interest in the study of world history. Such curiosity intensified as U.S. citizens realized, with some apprehension, that the national finances of the great American economic giant were intertwined with a global economic system. Three other phenomena were also at work. Demographically and culturally, the USA was clearly becoming far more complex and variegated after 1945, as immigrants from all over the globe swelled its numbers and enriched its social fabric. No longer was the standard Euro-American history a satisfactory response to the question, “What are our roots?” With increased prosperity, higher levels of general education, greater leisure time, and faster modes of intercontinental travel, Americans were on the road to foreign destinations in numbers that multiplied annually, adding significantly to a growing awareness of and interest in the cultures of once-distant peoples. Then there was television and the other media of mass and fast communication that followed. Not only were Americans now able to view in their homes the cultures and histories of societies that once were largely unknown to the average university-educated American, but American culture was now going global and often returning to the U.S.A. in altered but interesting ways.

Additionally, world history pedagogy and scholarship has taken root far beyond the US’s shores, as World History Association meetings in Turkey, Spain, China, Costa Rica, Australia, and other non-US venues bear witness.

Most historians— certainly those who consider themselves students, consumers, or producers of works on world history—agree that this accelerating interest has been and will continue to be a good thing. Indeed, those who devote their lives to world history tend to be evangelical; some even believe that humanity’s very survival as a species depends upon our developing a nuanced understanding of the history of the world in which we live.

World history’s enthusiasts only begin diverging when they start defining their interests and methodological approaches. All agree, however, on one issue. World history is not a collection of national or regional histories studied one after another. Although such histories are elements of the global mosaic, in the context of world history they never stand alone and are only parts of a much larger story. Put briefly (and to repeat), world history is a study of the past that transcends or crosses national, regional, and cultural boundaries. At the same time, world history is not, and can never be, the history of everything that has ever happened in the world. In order to be coherent and comprehensible, our remembrance, or reconstruction, of the past must be ordered and assembled with an end in mind.

World history as understood and supported by NERWHA and its parent organization, the World History Association, is not necessarily global history, although many of its members, especially those who specialize in modern world history, use the terms interchangeably. The reason why the WHA and NERWHA chose the term “world history,” as opposed to “global history,” is that many of its members specialize in trans-cultural, trans-regional studies that antedate 1492 and the beginning of globalization. Moreover, teachers of world history at every level traditionally begin their courses either with the emergence of *Homo sapiens* or the rise of agriculture and spend fully fifty percent of the academic year dealing with Afro-Eurasia, the Americas, and Oceania as areas of the world largely isolated from one another. So, if not global in the sense of necessarily looking at an interconnected global community, what is world history?

In a sentence, world history is “big picture” history that is concerned with such phenomena as contact, communication, connections, and cultural exchanges between and among cultures. For example, a specialist who studies the transmission of goods, ideas, flora, fauna, and diseases across the so-called Silk Road is a world historian, even though she/he essentially focuses on Eurasia before ca. 1350 CE. Likewise, world history is often comparative, and its practitioners might study such phenomena as the various forms of modern colonialism around the world. This does not exhaust the types of world history practiced by its scholars and taught in the schools. Some world historians focus on the study of economic world systems; others look at the interplay of so-called centers and peripheries, and it seems that the list can go on almost endlessly. The point is that while the world historian’s scope can be global, it need not be. But it must be large and trans-cultural, trans-regional, and, when any aspect of modernity is studied, trans-national.

NERWHA sustains the advancement of scholarship through the work of researchers and teachers at the university, collegiate, and secondary levels. Roughly sixty percent of NERWHA’s membership is comprised of college and university faculty members from institutions of higher learning scattered across all six New England states. At the same time, the association includes a

significant number of teachers (especially at the high school level). Additionally, NERWHA's membership includes a notable number of independent scholars and students, all of whom are active in the field.

The founders of NERWHA believed that this dual emphasis on scholarship and teaching and equally NERWHA's balance of emphasis on the pre-collegiate and post-secondary levels of education would be critical in establishing and maintaining the field of world history as a vital area of academic discourse. This philosophy continues to infuse all NERWHA activities.