

TOMPKINS COUNTY HISTORIAN
215 Court Street, Ithaca, New York 14850

March 29, 2016

Commissioner Mary Ellen Elia
State Department of Education
89 Washington Street
Albany, New York 12234

We write as members of the Commission on Local and Public History that was convened ten years ago by Deputy Commissioner for Cultural Education Carole Huxley to advise the Department of Education on the appointment of a State Historian.

The community that we represent—county and municipal historians, university scholars, archivists, preservationists, educators, and many others—plays a critical role in educating the public about New York’s heritage. This is a mission we share with the Department, and we have long been one of its most supportive constituent groups.

Our state once led the nation in educating the public and making people aware of the importance and usefulness of state history. The Office of State History was eliminated during the financial crises of the 1970s, however, and the State Historian position was downgraded from assistant commissioner status to a staff position within the State Museum. Different State Historians have since worked to maintain their leadership role with New York’s public and private historians, but their effectiveness has always been compromised by the Museum’s focus on its internal priorities.

We were consequently pleased to learn that the Regents approved the Office of Cultural Education’s 2011 strategic plan to “reinvent the office of state history.” This action would have energized and focused our community on its educational mission and restored New York to its rightful leadership position in the fields of public education and state history.

Sadly, however, we were very disappointed to learn of the Department’s recent decision to reject its own strategic plan by downgrading the State Historian position and keeping it in the State Museum. This action makes little sense to us, and we urge you to reconsider this unfortunate decision. We recognize that the Department has numerous practical considerations, including restrictive budgetary and hiring limitations, but we feel that it would be in the public interest to seek the advice of your constituents before proceeding any further.

We believe that, at a minimum, no action should be taken on this matter until the appointment of a new Deputy Commissioner for Cultural Education, and we offer our services to help him or her explore reasonable options and determine a more satisfactory course of action.

On behalf of ourselves and our many colleagues, we look forward to the possibility working with you on this important matter. Thank you for your consideration.

Most sincerely,

Carol Kammen

Judith Wellman

Kammen was New York Public Historian of the Year, 2005, member and chair, New York State Committee on Public and Local History; Senior Lecturer in History, Cornell University, retired; editorial writer *History News* and author *On Doing Local History*

Wellman was New York Public Historian of the Year, 2006; member, New York State Committee on Public and Local History. She is also Professor Emerita, State University of New York at Oswego, and Director, Historical New York Research Associates.