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Faculty Profile

Philip Silvia



At a time when college faculty are being criticized for concentrating their research efforts on narrow fields of specialization, Philip Silvia of the History Department is moving in the opposite direction—his field of study is an entire city and its rich historical legacy. Phil is the recognized professional historian of Fall River, Massachusetts, a city with a proud heritage as the premier U.S. textile center of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In his twenty-four years at Bridgewater, Phil has done extensive research on Fall River culminating in the publication of two volumes entitled *Victorian Vistas*, which utilize newspaper stories and other written materials to paint an intimate picture of a city and a people. *Victorian Vistas* is an example of what has come to be called popular history in which historians concentrate their research on ordinary people, their work, their culture, their leisure time and their personal relationships. Volume Three of *Victorian Vistas*, which will be published this November, completes Phil's study of his hometown, covering the period from 1901 to 1911 when Fall River celebrated its Cotton Centennial Year.

In many ways it was natural for Phil to become Fall River's historian. Like many residents of the city, Phil was a descendant of Portuguese immigrants who came to Southeastern Massachusetts looking for employment and a new life. Phil takes pride in his ancestors, including his grandfather Frank M. Silvia who was the first Portuguese-American judge in the United States. Building on this ethnic pride and strong attachment to his birthplace, Phil graduated from Providence College and eventually received his Ph.D. from Fordham University in New York City where he studied under Professor Humbert Nelli, a noted immigration history scholar, who encouraged him to concentrate on ethnic history as it related to Fall River. Phil's doctoral dissertation was entitled *The Spindle City* and was his first scholarly effort at exploring the

development of Fall River.

Since the writing of the dissertation, Phil has delved more deeply into the relationship of urban life, immigration and the industrial revolution. Phil became fascinated with the immigrants' impact on Fall River's development. In Phil's view, Fall River was a "starter" city where new waves of immigrants added their hard work, ingenuity and unique culture to form a vibrant urban center that at one time was the envy of the industrial world. Unfortunately, shortly after World War I, Fall River entered a period of steep economic decline as the mills went South and the city was unable to recover its days of glory. There were periods of short revival, but today Fall River is an example of a city desperately in need of a new "start."

Despite the fact that Fall River has fallen on hard times, Phil Silvia continues his love affair with his birthplace. He speaks regularly to many groups in town, is active in the Fall River Historical Society, and teaches courses to educators on Fall River history and the impact of immigration on Southeastern Massachusetts. Phil feels it is his professional obligation to work with the residents of Fall River and inform them of the past wonders and current possibilities of their city. One of Phil's proudest accomplishments was his involvement, as historical consultant, with a thirty minute educational film called "The Fabric of Fall River" that is shown at the Fall River Heritage Park. The movie is designed to introduce visitors to Fall River to the history of this important textile city.

For this broad range of activity in support of the working men and women of Fall River, Phil received The Dean Richard M. Fontera Memorial Award from the Arnold Dubin Labor Education Center at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth.

As a true son of Fall River, Phil has expanded his commitment to the city by being an active member of the board of trustees for St. Anne's Hospital. St. Anne's is one of two hospitals in Fall River and an important medical and economic resource. Phil has worked on numerous

committees of the board and recently was involved in important negotiations to develop a new affiliation for the hospital which will help it to better fulfill its healthcare mission. Phil has been most impressed with the community service work of the hospital, particularly by the religious sisters that manage and work there. The Dominican Sisters of the Presentation came to Fall River in 1906 and ministered to the workers of the textile mills. In the 1990s the Sisters are now continuing their work with the growing Hispanic community of Fall River.

If research and hospital service are not enough to keep him busy, Phil has also worked with the Preservation Society of Fall River and as a member of the city's Historical Commission to protect many of the Victorian homes and the aging mill buildings from destruction. The beautiful homes of the mill owners and the mills themselves are the heart and soul of Fall River and the setting for much of Phil's research on the connection between the industrial revolution and the men and women who clothed the world for much of the nineteenth century.

Also, as part of his recent workload, Phil chaired a scholarly panel which convened this summer to discuss Fall River's most celebrated event, the Lizzie Borden murder controversy. Not surprisingly, Phil has his own theory on the Borden murders and is more than willing to go into great detail about the Borden family and the so-called "murder of the century." Like any good historian, Phil is a fine story teller.

Bridgewater has many special faculty members, but Phil Silvia stands out as one who has taken his research off campus and into the community where he lives. Phil's work on Fall River is an important contribution to the understanding of the region where Bridgewater is situated. Many students who have grown up in this region enroll in Phil's class in immigration history or textile history to find out about their heritage. When they enter the class they experience one of the finest lecturers on campus who not only knows his material but has lived it all his life.