Dear friends of Temple's Public History program:

I'm delighted to announce that Anne Parsons, a current Balch Institute Fellow at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, has agreed to visit campus and discuss her research concerning the de-institutionalization of Pennsylvania's mental hospitals and prisons during the 1960s.

Parsons, a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at the University of Illinois at Chicago, studies gender, sexuality, and public history.  She's particularly interested in recent conversations concerning the preservation of the nearby Pennhurst State School.  You may recall some controversy surrounding this site last October when its owner staged a Halloween haunted house there (see <<http://whyy.org/cms/news/health-science/2010/09/24/haunted-house-at-mental-hospital-stirs-debate/46555>>).  Parsons will address this episode and other facets of the "haunted history" craze.  I've pasted an overview of her talk below.

This event will take place next Tuesday April 26 in Paley Library's Lecture Hall (ground floor) from 2:00 to 3:30.  I apologize for the late notice, but this talk was originally scheduled only for students in my American Studies "Reading Culture" course.  We've opened the conversation, however, given how many of you have expressed interest in the topic.

Please contact me if you have any questions and do join us next Tuesday for a what will be a fascinating discussion.

Best,
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During the 1960s, revolution was in the air: people fought for a world without racism, students organized and protested like never before, and an anti-institutional ethos permeated the counter-culture. This decade of change also brought a revolution in mental health as many people and policymakers fought for the end of the mental asylum, as it had been called historically. Between 1955 and 1980, hundreds of thousands of people were released from mental health institutions across the country.

In my presentation, I will discuss the history of the Pennhurst State School, a residential institution on the outskirts of Philadelphia which at its peak held over 4,000 residents. In 1968, a reporter exposed the terrible conditions at Pennhurst and as a result, community groups protested en masse for better services there. Even though the state government responded by pouring money into improvements at Pennhurst, the reforms did not solve the core problems and in 1973 a grassroots parents organization filed a lawsuit against Pennhurst, which eventually went to the Supreme Court. Over a decade later, the lawsuit won the closure of Pennhurst, and the case became a national landmark in the de-institutionalization of institutions for people with disabilities.

I will present this late twentieth century history and I will also lead a discussion about recent community efforts to preserve the memory of Pennhurst. Preservationists and disability rights activists are working together to preserve either part of or all of the institution from demolition by a developer. By calling for the preservation of Pennhurst, they are working to reclaim the complicated history of the institutionalization of people with disabilities, a story that too often goes untold and unheard.