Differentiating between official and vernacular memory is an important part of public history, and how history is presented to the public. In his book *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*, John Bodnar establishes the difference between official and vernacular history. He notes that official history is the history that is promoted by historical and cultural figures, such as government, educational, and military leaders, who place an emphasis on the nation-state, and are interested in maintaining the status-quo. The purpose of official history is to combat the rise of multi-culturalism and the increasing power of competing interests groups, such as minority or gender groups who they perceive as a threat to this status-quo (Bodnar 13). Vernacular history on the other hand, represents the memories of particular, and often times highly specialized groups of people. These groups can include minorities, soldiers, and people who grew up together in the same community. These memories are usually at odds with accepted official history, and they can even conflict with other vernacular histories (Bodnar 14).

Bodnar notes that the people who tend to support either the official or vernacular view of history are usually quite different from one another. Most cultural leaders who adhere to official history, tend to be middle-class professionals, such as teachers, lawyers, government officials, and military leaders, whose careers and social status are dependent on maintaining the status-quo of the institutions that are celebrated in commemorative activities (Bodnar 15). The group of people that support vernacular history are what Bodnar calls ‘ordinary people’ (Bodnar 16). These people are quite diverse and are represented by individuals from all social stations. These people are more likely to celebrate their ancestors, rather than the founding fathers, and are more...
interested in defending the interests of their own social segments, rather than those of cultural leaders and figures of authority (Bodnar 16).

David Glassberg’s article, “Public History and the Study of Memory,” further expands on the tensions and challenges that arise when talking about official and vernacular history. Glassberg talks about the role that politics plays in determining what kind of history is presented to the public. He notes that the history that is shown to the public is meant to be a collective or shared history that can hold together diverse groups of people (Glassberg 11). However, this history is pushed on people by the elite members of society who wish to be able to control their citizens, and may be void of sympathy for the rights and interests of vernacular groups (Glassberg 12).

Glassberg also talks about place consciousness in his article, and how a “sense of place” can affect vernacular history. He observes how people, especially children between the ages of six and twelve, form a strong emotional bond with the environment they grow up in. This “sense of place” however, is not just limited to children. Even in adulthood, the longer one lives in a certain community, the more bonds will develop with their friends and family that they have with them in that same community (Glassberg 18). The identity they develop within their community goes a long way in establishing a collective memory that they share with their fellow community members. The conversations, stories, and oral history that is spread and passed down from generation to generation results in the creation of a vernacular memory that becomes deeply embedded in the roots of that community, and this vernacular memory can often times contrast sharply with the official memory that is presented to them by politicians and cultural leaders.

John Bodnar provides several examples of how official and vernacular memory can conflict with one another. These conflicts arise most commonly during public commemorations
and the erecting and dedication of public monuments. A perfect illustration of the clash of official and vernacular memory can be found in Fourth of July celebrations. Official history teaches us that the Fourth of July is a time to celebrate patriotism and the founding of a nation. However, for many groups of people, the Fourth of July has a more specialized meaning. Some citizens use the day to honor their ancestors or veterans with ties to their local community, rather than the national idea of patriotism, and others use the day for leisure activities, much to the chagrin of cultural leaders (Bodnar 32). More explicit examples of vernacular celebrations can be found in Des Moines, Iowa, Lyon County, Iowa, Muskegon County Michigan, and Gallipolis, Ohio. Des Moines honored the lives of early pioneers, while Lyon County celebrated the achievements of ordinary people, such as the first person in the county to die and the first couple to be married. Michigan and Ohio commemorated the holiday by putting on exhibits that displayed items from early settlers that were passed down from generation to generation (Bodnar 34). The multitude of ways that one holiday can be celebrated is a perfect example of how vernacular memory conflicts with official memory, and it also illustrates David Glassberg’s observation of place consciousness, as many towns and counties focused on the history of their own community rather than the idea of a united nation-state.

John Bodnar also points to the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a source of contention between official and vernacular memory. When the memorial was first proposed in 1979, many political leaders thought that the memorial needed to promote national solidarity and the act of sacrificing one’s self for the good of the nation (Bodnar 3). This official view contrasted sharply with the beliefs of many ordinary people, who were not interested in promoting national unity or patriotism. Many of these people simply wanted to use the memorial to honor the lives of fallen soldiers and to relieve grief over the loss of family members who died
in the war (Bodnar 4). The design of the monument itself became a topic of debate as well. Many people were critical of the simplicity of the design, and many prominent political and cultural figures, such as H. Ross Perot, believed that the monument did not create a sense of patriotism and national glory (Bodnar 5). Even though a compromise was eventually reached with the addition of an American flag and a statue of three soldiers, the memorial represented a victory of vernacular memory over official, as the memorial embodied the ideals of comradeship and grief for loved ones over patriotism and nationalism (Bodnar 9).

Bodnar does an excellent job in helping people to understand the differences between official and vernacular memory, and how these memories intersect with one another. Further examples of these types of memories can be found in other class readings. One notable example includes our readings on the Civil War. Edward Linenthal and Dwight Pitcaithley illustrate how official memory can completely change the way people can come to think about a war, when they talk about the ‘Lost Cause’ and the idea of reconciliation. When talking about the battlefield of Gettysburg, Linenthal notes that the idea of reconciliation has led to a camaraderie between friend and foe, and that Northern veterans haven even come to accept the claims of Southerners that the war was fought over state’s rights, rather than slavery (Linenthal 91). Similarly, Pitcaithley noted that even though the centennial celebrations of the Civil War coincided with the civil rights movement, the idea of emancipation had been almost entirely replaced with the idea of reconciliation. Also, white southerners distanced themselves from the idea that slavery helped lead to the war, and the memory they connected to the war was military honor (Pitcaithley 171). Even more disturbing however, is the fact that Civil War historic sites, such as plantations, museums, and battlefields have distanced themselves from the topic of slavery as well. Even when attempts have been made to provide further meaning to these sites by giving visitors
background information on the causes of the war, they have been met with very strong criticism. The idea of reconciliation that has been preached when remembering the Civil War is another example of official history that stresses patriotism and national unity, at the expense of vernacular groups, such as African-Americans and emancipationists.

Bodnar also noted that vernacular memories can conflict with one another. This can be seen in the case of Lexington and Concord, which is pointed out by Edward Linenthal. Officially, the memory of Lexington and Concord is one of birth. These two places are seen as the birthplace of a nation, and the minuteman and their deeds were seen as cultural models for future generations and wars. However, on a vernacular level, the two towns have clashed with one another, as each town believes they were the rightful birthplace of the nation (Linenthal 36). People from Lexington believe that the first battle for independence took place in their town. On the other hand, citizens from Concord believe that the minutemen at Lexington did not fire on British soldiers, and that the first shots took place on the North Bridge in Concord, which made them the rightful birthplace of the United States (Linenthal 36). In the case of Lexington, we can also see how memories can be invented and become an important part of commemorations, as reenactments and art depict Lexington minutemen firing on British troops, despite contrary evidence (Linenthal 37).

John Bodnar does an excellent job of defining and explaining the differences between official and vernacular history. Understanding these two types of history is an invaluable tool for historians because it allows them to see what type of history is presented to the public. Official history stresses nationalism and unity, while vernacular history represents the interests and memories of smaller groups of individuals. Official and vernacular memories often intersect with one another, especially at national commemorations. While cultural leaders often use these
commemorations to stress patriotism and loyalty to the nation-state, ordinary people use these events to celebrate or honor vernacular memories, as seen in various Fourth of July celebrations. This intersection also leads to conflict, as official history is constantly trying to maintain the status-quo by battling movements such as the rise of multi-culturalism. As we have seen, any attempt to challenge official history by talking about ugly and unpopular topics such as slavery and racism, is often met with criticism by cultural leaders and by people who may be unaware of true events or who do not want to face the truth. Hopefully, public historians can try to successfully merge official and vernacular memory to try to stimulate individuals to do more historical research.