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LOCAL HISTORY JOURNALS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS: WHERE WOULD WE BE WITHOUT THEM?

Sandra Roff

In the era of digitization so much information is so easily accessed that it is difficult for contemporary researchers to imagine trying to locate documents, manuscripts, ephemera, and other local history finds without the aid of the Internet. We are still just a few decades removed from when this was the norm, and historians or genealogists searched for that forgotten or unknown document on the shelves of a library or even among the pages of a local history journal. These local history journals appeared all over the country and struggled for survival, some published for only a short period of time, while others weathered the storm and survive to this day. The contributions made by these journals are substantial, with hidden gems of information awaiting discovery by determined researchers.

History was only beginning to be recognized as an academic discipline when the American Historical Association was founded in 1884. Part of the movement to professionalize academic subjects acknowledged that it was important to contribute well-researched and readable articles to scholarly journals. As an outlet for this new historical scholarship the association published the *American Historical Review*, and other historical journals followed close behind. This was a significant change since before this new movement the “amateur” historian, who leisurely explored events, issues, and people, dominated the historical research scene. The new “professional” historian was reluctant to recognize the contributions of these amateurs, and the dialogue between these two groups was limited.¹ These dedicated “amateur” historians contributed a great deal to the field of history, and their accomplishments should not be overlooked.

The *American Historical Review* was an early scholarly history journal, but outlets for publishing historical research appeared soon after the founding of the country. The Massachusetts Historical Society dates to 1791 when Reverend Jeremy Belknap convened nine friends to come up with a method for collecting and preserving documents of American history. They wanted this new Massachusetts Historical Society to become not only a repository, collecting and preserving American history resources, but also a publisher. The first volume of the *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, a justly famous periodical, was published in

1792.² Independent local historical societies during the early period led the way in preserving and publishing documents of local and national importance, and the value of their work cannot be overemphasized. When the New-York Historical Society was founded in 1804, it, too, saw as its

and the power of accident.³

Their actual publication program began in 1811 when the first volume of *Collections* appeared. It contained journals of Verrazano and Hudson, assorted documents of New York, and previously unpublished laws established by the Duke of York in 1664-65.⁴ Ten volumes of the *Collections* were produced, and in 1917 the society launched the *New-York Historical Society Quarterly* as an outlet for scholarly research.⁵

The third independent historical society founded in the United States was the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts. Incorporated by the legislature of Massachusetts in 1812, its “object is to collect and preserve the most authentic ancient documents and memorials, and to excite new investigations and researches, upon whatever relates to the aborigines of America, and the subsequent discovery and history of the country.”⁶ Its publication record began in 1820 with the *Transactions and Collections* of the American Antiquarian Society, known as *Archaeologia Americana*. Covering topics as diverse as the records of the Massachusetts Bay Company to the diaries of Isaiah Thomas, eleven volumes followed, with the last appearing in 1911.⁷ Subsequent American Antiquarian Society publications have continued into the 20th and 21st centuries, supporting their mission of promoting our national past.

By the first decade of the 19th century the movement to form historical societies across the country was well underway, and societies in Rhode Island, Maine, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Indiana, Virginia, Louisiana, Vermont, Georgia, Maryland, Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Minnesota were all in operation before 1850. Many of these and other organizations established by the mid-19th century began with grand expectations of publishing important materials, but after a few years their original zeal dwindled, due in part to the policy of exclusionary membership and little public support. Most historical societies were privately funded during this early period, but some did receive minor state appropriations. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin did not have a major benefactor, and in 1855 it became a trustee of the state. It eliminated exclusive membership and instead focused on developing a strong library

PROCEEDINGS

OF THE

Massachusetts Historical Society.

1869-1870.

Published at the Charge of the Peabody Fund.



BOSTON:

PUBLISHED BY THE SOCIETY.

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mission the “collecting and preserving [of] important materials that may be invaluable to its future historians”:

Our inquiries are not limited to a single State or district, but extend to the whole Continent; and it will be our business to diffuse the information we may collect in such a manner as will best conduce to general instruction. As soon as our collection shall be sufficient to form a volume, and the funds of the Society will admit, we shall commence publication, that we may better secure our treasures by means of the press, from the corrosions of time

for scholars.⁸

By the third quarter of the 19th century, with the upcoming centennial celebrations being planned nationwide, communities rallied around the establishment of new historical societies with increased gusto. President Ulysses S. Grant made a “Centennial Proclamation” on May 25, 1876 which was to be read on July 4, 1876.

That it be, and is hereby, recommended by the Senate and House of Representatives to the people of the several States, that they assemble in their several counties or towns on the approaching centennial anniversary of our national independence and that they cause to have delivered on such day an historical sketch of such county or town from its formation, and that a copy of said sketch be filed in print or manuscript in the Clerk’s Office of said county, and an additional copy in print or manuscript be filed in the office of the Librarian of Congress, to the intent that a complete record may be thus obtained of the progress of our institutions during the first centennial of their existence.⁹

The call for local history projects was successful and publication initiatives proliferated. By the time the American Historical Association was founded, the nation’s historical societies had already made a monumental contribution to publishing and preserving the history of the nation.¹⁰

The American Historical Association called for a Conference of State and Local Historical Societies in December 1904 to discuss the problems that the societies faced. The convening of such a meeting was an early indication that the work of these institutions was significant. Benjamin F. Shambaugh of the State Historical Society of Iowa remarked that: “The publication of data of state and local history is one of the most important offices of the historical society. . . . For after the materials have been collected their contents should as far as possible be made accessible through publications. . . . Has some student done scholarly and critical piece work? Let it be published in the quarterly of the state society as a separate monograph.”¹¹

Whether it was due to this first Conference of State and Local Historical Societies in 1904 or just the growing interest of the public in the activities of local historical societies, there was a substantial increase in the number of state, local, and regional historical magazines published in the first quarter of the 20th century.¹² One of these magazines was the *Indiana Magazine of History*, which began in 1905. Its first issue contains an article entitled, “Our Reasons For Being,” which declares the magazine’s aim “to gather from surviving pioneers their testimonies, and to save from oblivion documents still accessible Already something like a score of States are represented by as many periodical historical publications, a number of them

quarterly magazines, devoted to the preservation of local material.”¹³ Other early publications had similar ideals.

In 1939 members of the Conference of State and Local Historical Societies proposed an independent entity to coordinate the activities of historical societies and encourage the writing and teaching of state and local history in the United States. It was officially organized in 1940 as the American Association of State and Local History.¹⁴ State and local historical societies continued to be founded, but it is difficult to come up with an exact number of these organizations. The American Association of State and Local History published a *Directory of Historical Societies and Agencies* in

It was the feeling at the time that many of these local societies were run by “little old ladies in sneakers.”

1961, but its definition of “historical society” is too broad, inflating the number. According to Walter Whitehill, no list will ever be accurate because documents are housed in many unusual places that will probably never make their way into an official directory.¹⁵

What has been the contribution of these many and varied historical societies to the field of knowledge in local history? Have the efforts of local citizenry saved documents and memorabilia from a fate of oblivion or worse still, destruction? Has the formation of local history journals and other assorted publications by these societies provided a body of information that has contributed to scholarship on the local as well as the national level? Answering these and other questions can give these often neglected societies and their publications the recognition that they deserve.

My own relationship to local historical societies can be traced back to the late 1960s, when I attended the newly instituted Cooperstown Graduate Program in History Museum Training and Folklore. This graduate program begun in 1964 was offered jointly by the New York State Historical Association and the State University College at Oneonta, New York. The New York State Historical Association had been active in educating the state’s teachers, and its director, Dr. Louis C. Jones, felt that the people who worked in historical societies and museums lacked the training necessary to preserve the objects and documents of our nation’s past.¹⁶ It was the feeling at the time that many of these local societies were run by “little old ladies in sneakers.” But just as 19th-century “amateur” historians made significant contributions to historical scholarship, these devoted volunteers also did a great deal with very little money and support. Slowly, though, newly trained professionals fanned out across the country and started to impact how historical societies were managed and what their legacy would be.

If we examine any of the historical society journals that have a long history, we will find numerous examples of the rich and valuable documents that have been preserved in their pages. The Kansas State Historical Society has been publishing since 1881. The *Kansas Historical Collections* (originally called the *Transactions of the Kansas Historical Society*) was the first of several publications that the society produced over the years. “The original purpose of the *Collections* . . . was to publish the Society’s biennial reports and items that were indicative of the nature of the Society’s holdings . . . but the early volumes of the *Collections* contain reprints of some of the primary resources held by the Society.” This tradition was passed down to the *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, which was inaugurated in 1931, and in 1978 to *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*.¹⁷ It is difficult to compute the value of published primary sources to the body of local history research, but when we consider the thousands of scholarly articles, books, theses, and dissertations that have relied on U.S. local history sources, the contributions of these publications remain significant.

The digitization projects of the 21st century are making many of these journals accessible to researchers around the world. Subscription databases often provide searchers with full-text articles easily available through a public or academic library. *America History and Life* is one such subscription database where many local history journals dating back to 1964 are included. Earlier journals can also be found in digital format, obtained in many cases through an open access policy subsidized by various organizations, such as universities, research centers, and government agencies. Individual institutions have also contributed to the body of journals that have been digitized, initiating their own digitization projects. One such institution is the Wisconsin Historical Society; on its website a researcher can view the *Wisconsin Magazine of History* dating as far back as 1917.¹⁸

The amount of material between the covers of local historical society journals awaiting scholarly examination is extensive, and the possibilities for exciting discoveries abound. Students and researchers often think that everything can be googled and found on the Internet, but on the shelves of local historical societies around the country there are undiscovered primary sources waiting to be revealed and interpreted. At a time when communities across the nation are trying to preserve their past and efforts are being made to make certain that this history is not lost or forgotten, it is important to remember that the earliest local historical societies founded in this country had the same concerns. Technological innovations that were unimaginable decades ago are providing new ways to store and retrieve information. We hope that what has now been digitized will be available for future researchers, but what remains in either print or digital format are the hundreds of local history journals that devoted local historians edited and published to pass on the history of

their community to generations to come.

Sandra Roff has been employed by several historical societies (New York Historical Society, Brooklyn Historical Society) and was a librarian in the Genealogy, Local History, and U.S. Division of the New York Public Library. She is presently a professor and the college archivist/information services librarian at Baruch College/CUNY, where she has worked for twenty-five years. She has curated numerous exhibits (real and virtual), written dozens of articles, presented papers, and developed three undergraduate courses for the information studies minor at Baruch College.

¹ Sandra Roff, "Return of the Armchair Scholar," *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 36 (2005): 49-50.

² William D.D. Jenks, "An Account of the Massachusetts Historical Society," *The American Quarterly Register* 10 (November 1837): 166.

³ "Correspondence. New York City Correspondence," *Zion's Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, January 3, 1849, 2; *New-York Herald*, February 13, 1805, quoted in Walter Muir Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies: An Enquiry into Their Research and Publication Functions and Their Financial Future* (Harvard University Press 1962), 39-40.

⁴ Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies*, 42.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 50-52.

⁶ "Monthly Miscellany, of Literary Intelligence, Remarkable Incidents, Obituary Notices, &c. &c.," *The Polyanthos*, 1 (November 1, 1812): 108.

⁷ Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies*, 75-76.

⁸ Sara Lawrence, "History of Historical Societies in the United States," posted January 23, 2003. www.publhistory.org/features/HistoricalSocietyHistory.html

⁹ "A Centennial Proclamation," *New York Times*, May 26, 1876, 2.

¹⁰ Julian P. Boyd, "State and Local Historical Societies in the United States," *American Historical Review* 40 (1934): 21-26.

¹¹ Frederick Wightman Moore, "First Report of the Confer-

ence of State and Local Historical Societies," *Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 6 (1905): 317, 323.

¹² Boyd, "State and Local Historical Societies in the United States," 33-34.

¹³ "Our Reasons for Being," *The Indiana Magazine of History* 1 (1905): 1-2.

¹⁴ www.aaslh.org/aboutus.htm. Accessed November 2, 2011.

¹⁵ Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies*, 350-51.

¹⁶ www.oneonta.edu/academics/cgp/about/history.html. Accessed November 2, 2011.

¹⁷ Patricia A. Michaelis, "Windows to Yesterday: The Journals of the Kansas State Historical Society," *Kansas History* 18 (1995): 211, 219.

¹⁸ www.wisconsinhistory.org/wmh/archives/search.aspx. Accessed November 29, 2011.

A MORAL MAN: EUGENE GENOVESE, 1930-2012*

David Moltke-Hansen

The doorbell rang at the South Carolina Historical Society in the spring of 1987. When I opened it, the couple standing there asked if David Moltke-Hansen were in. Then Gene and Betsey introduced themselves and said they had just stopped by to say how much they admired something I had written and to meet me. That night I told my wife to shoot me; it would never get better than that.

Fifteen or so years later, I was visiting with Gene and Betsey in Atlanta. Gene was distraught, almost frantic. It was Betsey's birthday, and the flowers he had ordered had not come. Betsey reassured him that she knew he was always thinking of her—except, of course, during baseball games and when he was reading and writing. That, I thought to myself, doesn't leave much time except in dreams, at meals, and in the car, with Betsey driving, because Gene never learned.

Until the last couple of years, when his health deteriorated even further, Gene worked incessantly. Witness the three books he saw through the press after his beloved Betsey's death five years and nine

months ago. In addition, he worked on the five volumes of Betsey's selected, uncollected writings, read manuscripts, and went through four newspapers a day. He worked like that for nearly sixty years.

Gene always was a moralist, whether as a Marxist or as a Catholic. He recognized the evil that men and women do through the acquisition and abuse of power, and he wanted to understand and combat that evil.

That abiding drive hints at another that animated those years. Gene always was a moralist, whether as a Marxist or as a Catholic. He recognized the evil that men and women do through the acquisition and abuse of power, and he wanted to understand and combat that evil. At one point scientific socialism seemed the way, but then communism failed and failed him, even as Marxism continued to influence what and how he wrote. Last year, rereading old political pieces of his from the 1960s and

1970s, he noted wryly: my reasoning was impeccable, just not my premises.

Uncompromising in his moral judgments, Gene thought it unforgivable weakness to quail from necessary action because of possible collateral damage. And he was entirely ready to see me become such damage. Once he told me (after just having handed me a new book that he had dedicated to me) that I should and would die at the revolution. Which revolution, I asked? Any worth its salt, he said. Liberals, social democrats, and other mealy-mouthed, intellectually flaccid temporizers, the implication was, need to be eliminated; or at least have power wrested or kept from them. He was not fond of libertarians either, thinking radical individualism radically wrong in the face of the collective challenges posed by power's corruption.

Now, when I become president, now when I become pope, Gene would say—suggesting he should be both—things will be different. The sad difference is that we no longer can hear him say that. We shall remember, however, more than his humor and passion and moral drive. We can still celebrate a brilliant interpreter of American slavery and the planter class, a tough colleague, and a generous friend.

*This eulogy originally appeared on the Historical Society blog, <http://histsociety.blogspot.com>.