

American Association for State and Local History

THE USES OF STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

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THE USES OF STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

In this well established ritual of our Association, observed every two years, you permit the president to walk up the mountain and take a look around. The high slopes are a lonely place this year. The view is clouded. All of the action is down in the valley, for that is where history is being made. What my metaphor is trying to say is that generalizations about state and local history—or anything else—come particularly hard in this year of surprise and trauma.

I come to you well traveled. The Association has carried me at least 20,000 miles by air and a few hundred on the ground. Thanks to the Association, I feel at home on freeways. Also, I can testify that the trains are no more on time in the East, West, and South than in the Middle West. I have had the good fortune during my term of office to witness the re-birth of one of our state historical societies—Alaska—in Anchorage. The opportunity to meet and work with Canadian groups has made me more fully aware of one of the enriching qualities of our organization, which we tend to take for granted—its binational character. Last year's meeting in Toronto, one of the best in my memory, introduced all of us to what most of us have been missing north of the United States border. Above all, my appreciation of the tremendous amount of effort at the grass roots of historical work has been enlarged.

This evening I would like to present one man's view of the condition and uses of state and local history in an era of social upheaval. While I occasionally draw upon the opinions of others for support, the impressionistic nature of these observations will be all too readily apparent. This approach reveals my bias about the nature of history, but you are entitled to know it sooner rather than later.

We are witnessing a constant acceleration in the velocity of history. This has now reached a point where lives alter with startling rapidity; where inherited ideas and institutions are in constant jeopardy of becoming obsolete. For an older generation, change was something of a historical abstraction, occasionally breaking through the social fabric with spectacular innovations, like the telegraph, the locomotive, the automobile, or

the airplane; it was not a daily threat to values and institutions. For our children, change is the vivid, continuous, overpowering fact of everyday life, saturating each moment with tension, intensifying the individual's search for identity.

New realities demand new values—or the reinterpretation of old ones—and when this change of assumptions takes place within a generation, children find their parents voicing one creed and often living by another. As Kenneth Keniston points out in a recent article published in the *American Scholar*, “no society ever fully lives up to its professed ideals.”

But a rapid rate of social change reveals this age-old gap in all its naked hypocrisy. Those among the young who are sensitive and thoughtful react with scorn. There are other groups—like the agricultural workers of the South—who find themselves stranded, their skills superseded by technology, and literally without a place to go. A recent issue of *Fortune Magazine* described the Mississippi plantation, “Due West, which now hires only nine full-time hands to operate 3,000 acres. Twenty years ago, one hundred Negro families lived and worked there.” And there are those for whom change brings a new awareness of injustice but no comparable shift in the attitudes and institutions responsible. These people boil with indignation. And above all, the men and women who find cherished beliefs and ways of life consigned to the scrap heap of history are filled with baffled fury. Thus we live in an angry society. The current presidential campaign daily reminds us of the negative assumptions that have so far dominated it. A visitor might conclude we were electing a sheriff instead of a President.

It is difficult not to concede at least one argument to Marshall McLuhan—his emphasis on the fact that this is the first generation to have grown up in the electronic age. Television affects children by its rapid and early communication to them of styles and possibilities of life, as well as by its horrid relish of crime and cruelty. But it affects the young far more fundamentally by creating new modes of perception. What McLuhan calls “the instantaneous world of electric informational media” alters basically the way people perceive their experience. Where the printed page gave experience a frame, McLuhan argues, providing it with a logical sequence and a sense of distance, electronic communication is simultaneous and collective; it “involves all of us all at once.” Thus children of the television age differ more from their parents than their parents differed from their own fathers and mothers. Both older generations, after all, were nurtured in the same typographical culture. The implications for those who explore the past are clear. The moorings of historical study, so long anchored to the written word and printed page, have been loosened—and irrevocably.

As technology diverts us from the printed frame of reference, it is also profoundly transforming the physical character of our lives. The increasing tempo of urbanization has deprived millions of Americans of decent surroundings. Mere existence in the largest cities is becoming almost unendurable. People move out to get closer to nature, only to find that nature moves farther from them. Kenneth Boulding in *The Impact of the Social Sciences* assesses the consequences:

Engineers, because of their insensitivity to the importance of social systems, are constantly devoting their lives to finding out the best way of doing something which should not be done at all. Planning that is done by engineers in the absence of any conscious appreciation of the social system within which it operates is frequently disastrous. One could cite water policy, flood control, urban renewal, highway construction, and in a good many other cases in which physical planning turns out to be socially costly.

Compounding our problems are the accelerating specialization and consequent fragmentation of our society. The engineer or management expert may make a cross-country move half a dozen times within as many years; his community is the company for which he works, not the place in which he lives or grew up. Scholars increasingly regard themselves as members of a professional discipline, not of any particular faculty or institution. American has always been a mobile society—one in which roots were often wrenched up—but now for a great number of our people roots scarcely exist at all. As community ties dissolve, family ties also weaken, and all too often the result is an isolated individual vainly seeking some identity among a lonely crowd of similar atoms. How many of us know who and what our great-grandparents were? How many live and work in the community where we played as children and went to school? How many can name a truly lifelong friend—one from our childhood with whom we still share more than an annual Christmas card? Irving S. Cooper, New York physician, writes:

The condition of Western man has so rapidly become one of increased loneliness and estrangement, in a world that changed too quickly to enable him to find stable values within it, that man has to a large extent lost the feeling and significance of the ultimate reality of being human.

Warnings about the damage man is inflicting upon his inner self and outward surroundings constitute one of the popular topics of the day. However one's reflections develop, they generally embrace these elements: (1) concern over the dehumanization of life; (2) fragmentation of man's collective existence—or culture; (3) skepticism about specialization ever solving the staggering social problems of our age; (4) the need to attack

our common problem with a blend of appreciation for their complexity and sensitivity to the human consequences resulting from the public policies pursued to eliminate them.

How can history—particularly local history—relate to this situation? In answering the question, we must first examine some intense debates in progress over the nature of history itself. One of these is being carried on not only in educational institutions but also on the street. On one side it is argued that the wave of the future is rolling away from us and toward other shores. History is said to have no relevance. The old, whether in literature or in public affairs, does not count for much. At the same time there is a feeling among minority groups that history—written largely by more dominant sectors of society—has ignored them and thus deprived them of a vital heritage. They view this lack of representation as a form of discrimination and as a denial of their historical franchise.

The other debate is carried on largely in college classrooms, historical societies, and in that new but rapidly multiplying species of institution—the research center. It concerns the makeup of history as an academic subject, what it is, what it is not, what it can and cannot do. Four lines of argument can be distinguished. First is the traditional view of history as a liberal art. It is one of the humanities; it belongs with the liberal arts of the medieval curriculum. Those who take this line do not affirm that history is either practical or useful. It is essentially the story of mankind, a chronicle, a legend, a tapestry. At the other extreme is a school that approaches the study of the past as a behavioral science. They view the stuff of history as empirical in the strict scientific sense, relying upon quantitative evidence, most often of a statistical nature. A third argument views history as a social science. It accepts the reality of historical causation—affirms that effects may be explained in terms of causes. History is thus vested with a force in the affairs of men, for if the causes can be modified, so can the effects. But the scholars who look for patterns of causation that explain events must inevitably rely upon presumptions about those events that are derived from their own time and environment. A fourth group is made up of the emerging historians who deny that history should be explained at all. Its members are not so much interested in explaining events of the past within an ideological framework as in demonstrating that assumptions about history and its meaning are merely the products of social forces which inevitably determine the nature of the assumptions.

These debates should be welcomed by all of us, as an association, in our own organizations, and as individuals. They apply equally at all ranges of historical focus—from observation of the rise and fall of civilizations to the study of a particular community.

Local history should not be confused, as it often is, with narrow history contrasted to broader history. It is not the lowest rung on a hierarchal ladder that stretches from the smallest hamlet to the entire world. Rather, as Philip D. Jordan has observed: "in local history the lens of research is directed so as to bring a detail into the foreground, while subordinating other details to a background position."

Because it can be sharply focused, local history has a particular advantage. It is susceptible to being validated with a precision lacking in wider-ranging subjects. This is well stated by Maurice Mandelbaum: "historians and philosophers would be well served if the theory of historiography were to have a greater variety of concrete problems to discuss than has previously been the case."

In an age of specialization, local history provides a feasible vehicle for research. Yet, its closeness to the human situation and manageable area of concentration tends to resist its dehumanization which is the fault of much specialization.

My favorite example is Fort Snelling, at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers. The frontier outpost was enclosed by a wall whose perimeter measured 1,600 feet; it occupied ten acres; its buildings were few; and its garrison seldom numbered more than 250 men. Yet no account of it can be written exclusively in terms of its local aspects. The historian reconstructing its story soon finds himself exploring the maneuvers of nations seeking control over vast reaches of territory; the jockeying for position of fur companies with headquarters in Montreal, New York, and St. Louis; the unlocking of the geographical mysteries of the Upper Mississippi Valley; the tides of Indian migration and the pressures of advancing white civilization on the native cultures. In other words, although the historian of Fort Snelling has taken up what is presumably a local and restricted subject for examination, he has been forced into political, economic, and social backgrounds and has been obliged not only to travel wilderness paths and canoe routes but also the pavements of Washington and the streets of foreign capitals. He finds his area of research broadening to round out his subject. If it did not do so, he would miss the very meaning of Fort Snelling's existence.

One of the commonest errors about local history stems from the conception that American life was similar to European life. There the locale was in many cases truly isolated. For centuries Old World villages and provinces remained pretty much as they had always been. There was little change in population, architecture, traditions, or economic base. The graveyard showed headstones inscribed with names of several generations, and local ways possessed a remarkable stability. American and Canadian villages were quite different. Never set in permanent form, they

usually mushroomed along routes of travel—at a port, a crossroads, a river landing, a railway depot. They were forever on their way from here to there, their horizons bounded only by the mouth of the river or the end of the tracks. Localities became less localized, reaching for far-flung points of reference, and local history became more accurately regional history.

What, then, can the study of local history bring to a fragmenting society that seems increasingly devoid of meaning to an alarming number of its citizens? At least four things, as I see it: immediacy, identity, perspective, and an acceptance of change. Writes J. H. Plumb in a recent issue of the *Saturday Review*:

Perhaps the greatest pleasure of local history is its immediacy. It brings one face to face with ordinary men and women who once walked the streets that we walked and are now dead and almost forgotten. The bundles of letters which are so frequently the core of an article in a journal of local history have a poignancy that is rarely matched. They express hopes and fears, affection, love, want, despair; in them our common humanity is bared. Written without a thought of posterity, they reveal human character as sharply as any novel.

The writer might have added that there is no more convincing demonstration of the relevance of the past. For local history brings with it a special dimension of reality. Here the individual is not lost to sight. Clifford L. Lord put this well when he said: “The study of history at the local level—the study of people—reveals how things really happen; how things act and react, how the wheels and gears of history mesh and cog with one another.”

Local history shows men and women living together, working (or failing to work) together, in politics, business, and government, and in social and cultural pursuits.

By affirming the place of the individual in the community, local history can help to preserve or rebuild a sense of identity. One need not be a lifelong resident of a town to feel that he belongs there and is a part of its ongoing story. The streets belong to him who knows whence their names came, what they looked like fifty or a hundred years ago, and who walked their pavements. The past may seem to some like a shadow world but they will find that at times it has a deeper grip than the bustling, ever-transient present. The sense of continuity is bound up with the past—with the view of life as a stream in which each individual plays his part and affects not only the visible world around him but the future. Such a view can free man from the sense of isolation, from the haunting questions, “Who am I? Where did I come from? What am I a part of?”

All too often these values of history are overlooked. Far too many of

our fellow citizens see local history as essentially lifeless and historians as mere attic explorers. The very words conjure up relics and ancestor worship. And sometimes we ourselves are partially to blame. One of the sharpest criticisms, made in the context of historic sites, has been leveled by David Lowenthal in an article entitled "The American Way of History."

What is absent in America's pursuit of the past is the familiarity of constant association. What is old is looked upon as special, "historic," different. Not wanting to be dominated by "antiquity," Americans anathematized the past. In the process, they became conscious of antiquity as a separate realm. And as the past was cut away from the present, history emerged as an isolated object of reverence and pleasure. It became "Historyland"—something to be visited on Sunday afternoons.

Take, for example, Independence Hall. It is a national shrine and is treated as such—painstakingly restored, surrounded by lawns, and reserved for the admiring tourist almost as though it were under glass. In Europe it would be carefully preserved but still in use for the daily affairs of men—like Westminster Abbey, where past merges naturally into present with scarcely a break.

Lowenthal has a point. The study of history too often lacks a sense of evolution. Anniversaries, in particular, have a way of hardening the arteries of historical events and personages. It is common to place them on a pedestal as fixed and inexorable. A refreshing contrast is found in Charles A. Lindbergh's view of the fortieth anniversary of his epoch-making flight. Walter S. Ross in *The Last Hero* writes:

On Tuesday, May 16, 1967, at the Lotos Club in New York many of Lindbergh's old friends and colleagues gathered at dinner to remember him, as the fortieth anniversary of his famous flight (May 20-21, 1927) approached Later the same week there was a dinner with speeches at the Garden City Hotel, a plaque was dedicated at the approximate spot where the "Spirit of St. Louis" left the ground (from what used to be Roosevelt Field, and is now a shopping center); a pilot flew a replica of the "Spirit" around the Eiffel Tower in Paris Lindbergh was not present at any of these events. A friend offered to keep track of these and other anniversary celebrations. "No thanks," said Lindbergh. On the anniversary date of his flight, he was in Indonesia tracking a rare species of rhinoceros threatened with extinction. The general told a friend he thought it futile to keep on promoting an event that took place forty years ago. "I devoted time to that in 1927 and '28," he said, "and I've written two books about it. It's not that era any more, and I'm not that boy."

Local history will have no greater test of its power to combat a frozen stereotype of past events than in the upcoming bicentennial of the Ameri-

can Revolution. Will this anniversary of the cardinal event in the history of the United States go the regrettable way of the Civil War centennial that was launched in a burst of commercialism and ill-conceived hoopla? Or will we seize this opportunity to reexamine and reevaluate the event in the light of a new age of revolution? Will we emphasize the fact that there was nothing fixed and foreordained about it—that the cause of the Revolution hung in the balance, that its nature and meaning evolved through time, that it might have had many possible outcomes?

The challenge falls to our Association as much as to any group. Under the most favorable conditions the task is a difficult one. How do you commemorate a revolution in an age when revolution has changed in meaning to our nation? How do you show that although the American Revolution overthrew an imperial power—symbolized by George III—the rebels continued to emulate and admire much in the civilization of the enemy? How do you explain a revolution that gave birth to the first new nation—a nation that now has the oldest continuing form of government in the world? And how do you portray to present-day youth a revolution that fell short of its ideals by achieving equality for some men but perpetuating servitude for others? It demands the most careful understanding of the parallels and the vast differences between the Revolutionary period and our present situation.

Perhaps we should pause and listen to the words of John Adams, written to Thomas Jefferson in 1815:

What do we mean by the Revolution? The war? That was no part of the Revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The Revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen years before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington. The records of thirteen legislatures, the pamphlets, newspapers in all the colonies, ought to be consulted during that period to ascertain the steps by which the public opinion was enlightened and informed concerning the authority of Parliament over the colonies.

In his classic work *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Bernard Bailyn describes why this event belongs as much to the American future as to its past:

How else could it end? . . . The details of this new world were not as yet clearly depicted; but faith ran high that a better world than any that had ever been known could be built where authority was distrusted and held in constant scrutiny; where the status of men flowed from their achievements and from their personal qualities, not from distinctions ascribed to them at birth; and where the use of power over the lives of men was jealously guarded and severely restricted. It was only where there was this defiance, this refusal to truckle, this distrust

of all authority, political or social, that institutions would express human aspirations, not crush them.

If we carry this sense of the American Revolution into the bicentennial, it could make the anniversary a most significant event. For one of the great lessons to be derived from a study of the past is that change is the perpetual condition of mankind. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes observed, "it is not so much where we stand, it is a question of in what direction are we moving."

Our view of history itself is constantly changing, its focus being adjusted to new forces and new values. Jacksonian Democracy is interpreted quite differently now than it was a century ago; explanations of the Civil War and the Reconstruction era vary today from those of yesterday; our understanding of the role of the immigrant has been modified. No longer are Turner's frontier and sectional theses accepted as gospel, and the very concept of America as a unique experiment in the history of mankind is called into question.

There will be no final answers. But through this process of constant revision, history can bring perspective to a society in turmoil. This is probably its greatest contribution to an age in which man reshapes his environment but seems impotent to control his inner self, in which humanism no longer seems to motivate the thought of men as does science, and in which the machine threatens to become the arbiter of values. Wrote the English scholar William Edward Hartpole Lecky a hundred years ago:

History is never more valuable than when it enables us, standing as on a height, to look beyond the smoke and turmoil of our petty quarrels, and to detect in the slow developments of the past the permanent forces that are steadily bearing nations onwards to improvements or decay.

The perspective of history can equate contemporary problems with past fears and can offer a measure of comfort. It can demonstrate that there is no need to despair. Mankind has faced monumental crises before and has come through them. History can show that despite the appearance of the machine age, it is the individual—the you and the me—that gives meaning to life, that creates ideas and ideals which shape our daily experience.

Writing in 1960, George F. Kennan challenged historians:

It may be true that we are condemned to explore only tiny and seemingly unrelated bits of a pattern already too vast for any of us to encompass, and rapidly becoming more so. All these things, to my mind, merely make the effort of historical scholarship not less urgent but more so.

On the course of debates over method, we must never lose sight of our basic job and ultimate goal—the deepening of our people's understanding

of history. A need for a widespread sense of history among Americans has never been greater. An increasing number of people seem to know more and more about a restricted subject and less and less about the world of which they are a part. Although our physical frontiers are expanding into space, greater conformity is developing among us, and opportunities to share moral and intellectual values are diminishing. Young people, confronted with the fastest rate of change the world has known, find it ever more difficult to communicate with the older generation. As Margaret Mead has pointed out:

There is tremendous confusion today about change. . . . Young people have been confronted with the changes, but at the same time they have no sense of history and no one has been able to explain to them what has happened.

We are always very poor at teaching the last 25 years of history. Adults have been shrieking about the fact that great newnesses are here but they are not talking about what the newnesses are. . . . I'm not denigrating the crisis but in order to cope with change you have to know what is new and what is old.

Racial minorities, groping for a sense of identity and pride, are seeking eagerly for their own roots in the past—roots that at once bind them and lend support to our common destiny as a nation.

To avoid being overwhelmed by the passing scene, we as individuals need to see our world in perspective—to understand it in terms of what has gone before. Today there are vital reasons for understanding and perpetuating the ties that hold our increasingly disparate and complex world together—the common heritage of traditions, customs, and values that cements individuals into groups and binds groups into communities and nations. Also we need to be reminded of the nature of the species we belong to, and of both the limitations and possibilities of the human condition. History, the memory of mankind, is *the* humane study, and through whatever channel we choose to approach it, we must keep in mind the need of man to see himself as he is—linked with both past and future.