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Sandra Roff

CUNY Bernard M Baruch College

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Local History Journals and Their Contributions: Where Would We Be Without Them?

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 prior to this new movement, the “amateur” historian who leisurely explored events, issues and people, dominated the historical research scene.¹ These “amateur” historians contributed a great deal to the field of history and their accomplishments should not be overlooked.

Although the *American Historical Review* was an early scholarly history journal, there were outlets for publishing historical research beginning soon after the founding of the country. The Massachusetts Historical Society dates to 1791 when Reverend Jeremy Belknap, convened nine friends for the purpose of deciding on 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. “...[I]t was proposed by Dr. BELKNAP, in the autumn of 1791, to encourage a periodical contemplated by two young men, just commencing the business of printing. Accordingly, in a sheet attached to the “American Apollo” which made its appearance weekly, in 1792, commencing with the year, the publications of the Society began, and thus was completed the first volume of their “Collections.””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 mission “collecting and preserving important materials that may be invaluable

to its future historians.”³ The *New-York Herald* and other New York City newspapers published an address of the Society to the public. They stated the following concerning disseminating information:

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 and the power of accident.⁴

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 1664/5.⁵ Ten volumes of the *Collections* were produced, but other funds during the 19th century were allocated for publishing additional materials on American history. In 1917 the Society launched the *New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, as an outlet for scholarly research.⁶

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 their “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.”⁷ They began their publication record in 1820 with the *Transactions and Collections* of the American Antiquarian Society, known as *Archaeologia Americana*. Covering topics as diverse as records of the Massachusetts Bay Company to the diaries of Isaiah Thomas, eleven volumes followed, with the last appearing in 1911.⁸ Subsequent American Antiquarian Society publications 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 Rhode Island, Maine, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Indiana, Ohio, 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. The formation of historical societies continued in the third quarter of the 19th century, and by the 1870s 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 the following official “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

With so many local historical societies founded in the 19th century, 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. In its first issue it published an article entitled, "Our Reasons For Being," where it stated its purpose was "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. *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* began publication in 1917 and in the editorial, "Introducing Ourselves," gave the justification for this magazine. "The publication of a quarterly magazine, devoted to the historical interests of the state will afford a better avenue of communication with the Society's members and the general public than has been possessed heretofore."¹⁴ The same reasons for initiating a local history journal were echoed by the numerous other early publication editors.

In 1939 members from the Conference of State and Local Histories 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.¹⁵ 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 1961, but it included a broad definition of historical societies, eliminating many of the entries as actual historical societies. According to Walter Whitehill, no list will ever be accurate because documents are housed in many unusual places which will probably never make their way into an official directory.¹⁶

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 Dr. Louis C. Jones, then the Director of the New York State Historical Association, felt that the personnel that worked in historical societies and museums lacked the training necessary to preserve the objects and documents of our nation's past.¹⁷ It was the feeling at the time that many of these local societies were run by "little old ladies in sneakers." In the same way that we speak of "amateur" historians making significant contributions to historical scholarship, these devoted volunteers also did a great deal with very little money and support. Slowly, these newly trained professionals fanned out across the country and started to impact how historical societies were managed and what their legacy would be.

Local historical society publications continued to be an important way to disseminate new historical information. Writing in 1961, James H. Rodabaugh, stated that although the myriad of

educational programs and activities that local historical societies were involved in were important, the publication of articles in local historical society journals “ultimately illuminates, guides, and directs our national life.”¹⁸ He goes on to say that in his opinion “the society journals have become the great source books of state and regional American history,” and that the purpose of all historical society journals has been and continues to be an outlet for articles and documents that will be a reliable source of information for future generations. Change was in the air when Rodabaugh wrote his article and he discussed the movement to aim publications at the general reader to attract a larger circulation.¹⁹ Whether the result is a separate journal or newsletter published for the general public, in addition to the more scholarly work, the outcome is still a venue available for local history to be documented, collected and studied-- objectives that date back to the earliest historical societies and their journals.

If we examine any of the historical society journals that have had 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 which 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.”²⁰ 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*. “The use of edited primary resources continued in most volumes of the *Quarterly* and frequently in *Kansas History*.”²¹ 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 remains 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 are included dating to 1964. 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 or government agencies. Individual institutions have also contributed to the body of journals that have been digitized, initiating digitization projects. One such institution is the Wisconsin Historical Society which from its website a researcher can view the *Wisconsin Magazine of History* dating as far back as 1917.²²

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 this sometimes hidden research tool, is found on the shelves of local historical societies around the country, ready for undiscovered primary sources 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.

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- ¹ Sandra Roff, "Return of the Armchair Scholar," *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, 36 ,2 (2005):49-50.
- ² William D.D. Jenks, "An Account of the Massachusetts Historical Society," *The American Quarterly Register*, 10,2 (November 1837): 166.
- ³ "Correspondence. New York City Correspondence," *Zion's Herald and Wesleyan Journal*, (January 3, 1849): 2.
- ⁴ "New-York Herald," (February 13, 1805) in *Independent Historical Societies*, by Walter Muir Whitehill (Boston: Harvard University Press), 39-40.
- ⁵ Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies*, 42.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 50-52.
- ⁷ "Monthly Miscellany, of Literary Intelligence, Remarkable Incidents, Obituary Notices, &c. &c.," *The Polyanthos*, 1 (November 1, 1812): 108.
- ⁸ Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies*, 75-76.
- ⁹ "A Centennial Proclamation," *The New York Times*, May 26, 1876, 2.
- ¹⁰ Julian P. Boyd, "State and Local Historical Societies in the United States," *The American Historical Review*, 40, 1 (October 1934): 21-26.
- ¹¹ Frederick Wightman Moore, "First Report of the Conference of State and Local Historical Societies," *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society*, 6,3 (September 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*, 1,1 (1905): 1-2.
- ¹⁴ "Introducing Ourselves," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 1,1(September 1917): 76.
- ¹⁵ <http://www.aaslh.org/aboutus.htm>. Accessed November 2, 2011.
- ¹⁶ Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies*, 350-351.
- ¹⁷ <http://www.oneonta.edu/academics/cgp/about/history.html>. Assessed November 2, 2011.
- ¹⁸ James H. Rodabaugh, "Historical Societies: Their Magazines and Their Editors," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 45, 2 (Winter 1961-1962): 116.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 117, 120.

²⁰ Patricia A. Michaelis, "Windows To Yesterday: The Journals of the Kansas State Historical Society," *Kansas History*, 18, 3 (1995): 211.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 219.

²² <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/wmh/archives/search.aspx>. Accessed November 29, 2011.