ORGANIZATION AND AID FOR LOCAL HISTORY IN THE UNITED STATES

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The increasing recognition of the importance of regional, state and local history in the proper writing and interpretation of national history is one of the most significant trends in present American historical thought. With it there is a growing realization of the important educational values in terms of better citizenship inherent in a larger use of state and local history in the public educational program. As a nation, we are also becoming more conscious of the importance of conserving records, documents, newspapers, antiquities and buildings from which much of our future history must be written or dramatized. We have very probably reached the end of that era in American historical scholarship when sweeping hypothesis, such as the frontier influence, or that of economic determinism, will be used glibly to explain all of the intricacies of our national development. History will come more and more to be regarded as an evolutionary process with the roots of culture, institutions and behaviour strongly attached in native local soil.

It is axiomatic, once we accept the theory that this approach to history is of considerable if not vital importance, that much of the future of historical research and teaching is related directly to the efficacy of our state and local historical agencies. Whether supported by public or private funds they must provide the depository facilities necessary to house records and materials essential to scholarly research. In addition they must assume leadership in acquiring these materials and in making them available to the historian and to the public. Upon them must fall much of the burden of editing and publishing studies in local history. In addition to these services, they must endeavor to arouse general public historical consciousness, and preserve and mark significant

historic sites or buildings. They should assume some responsibility for assisting schools to make use of state and local history. The preservation of those relics and antiquities which form so important a part of the well developed museum may constitute also an important contribution of these agencies to the understanding of historical backgrounds. The adequate performance of these functions is of basic importance to the future of American historiography. With this in mind, let us proceed to survey sketchily the present status of local historical organization in the United States.

There are evidently over six hundred strictly local or regional historical societies in this country. There are many other patriotic and commemorative associations which are more or less interested in the perpetuation of historical facts and contribute somewhat to this end through their activities program. Of the former, little is known, and there is not existent any single publication or source of information which provides a complete list of the local historical societies. As to the historical activities of the latter, still less is known. In general, as the result of a survey of state organizations which the writer conducted about a year ago, the conclusion is reached that the local societies are regarded by a majority of those interested in state and local history in a professional capacity as largely inoperative and unproductive. The number of such societies varies from state to state. Pennsylvania appears to have more than any other state. Approximately two-thirds of the counties have a county-wide historical society and there are several more local organizations as well as regional groups. In the western states where powerful statewide societies are functioning, the local society appears to have little importance.

An evaluation of the activities of these groups, consequently, is very difficult. They possess obvious weaknesses. Their resources are apt to be very limited with consequent difficulty in developing substantial collections of either historical documents or museum materials. For the same reason, a publications program of note is difficult. There is also frequently a lack of trained personnel to administer those materials which the society does possess. The purely local societies often suffer also from a lack of facilities for cooperation with others in the exchange of ideas and materials.

These are criticisms, however, which are usually made by those with an extremely professional approach to history and there is
evidence that they are counterbalanced by certain advantages. In the first place, it is apparent to anyone who has worked in the field of local history that the strictly local historian possesses the advantage of specialization in a very narrow field. The same is true of the local society. It is frequently possible for a local or county society to secure from those who possess them documents, antiques and similar materials which could never be acquired by a statewide and certainly not by a national depository. The same applies to the accumulation of funds for membership and endowments. In Pennsylvania, for example, there are a number of county historical societies which equal or exceed in membership important statewide organizations. There is a local pride which can be relied upon to contribute to support of a local society but which often will not aid a statewide group.

Many of the natural handicaps of local organization may be overcome through some type of statewide federation. The assistance of some state agency may also prove a valuable aid. In Pennsylvania, where the writer may be pardoned for citing frequently from personal experience in the field of work under discussion, a statewide Federation of Historical Societies was established in 1905 as a result of the vision of several leaders in local historical society work. An annual meeting of the representatives of the local societies has been held and an annual *Year Book* listing the societies with considerable information as to their work has been issued. Since 1937 the state Historical Commission has permitted its historian to serve as a permanent secretary of this Federation and provided it with a central office and the facilities coincident thereto. This office and the personal contact which the secretary is able to maintain with the societies and their leaders has resulted in a statewide community of historical interest and activity previously unknown. The exchange of ideas and information has been facilitated. The formation of new societies has been aided and several dormant groups have been stimulated into new life.

The Pennsylvania Federation has undertaken recently the establishment of statewide committees to forward consideration of important historical problems, such as the preservation of the history, folklore and antiquities of the great Pennsylvania Canal system, and the preservation of local public records and the exchange of duplicate historical material among the several societies. In Pennsylvania, the problem of the patriotic society and its relation
to historical organization also has been met through the Federation. The original constitution of 1905 provided that all groups actively interested in Pennsylvania history might affiliate regardless of whether they were or not strictly historical societies. Several of the major patriotic organizations have joined the Federation and at present a drive is in progress to attract into membership those local chapters of patriotic societies which have a definite historical program and interest.

One of the greatest weaknesses of the local society has been the relative lack of general use of its collections and resources. In Pennsylvania this is overcome, at least in a large measure, by the publication of the Federation's *Year Book* which lists the member societies and provides information as to the location and availability of library and museum facilities. This bulletin is widely distributed throughout the country to libraries, institutions, and historically minded individuals in an endeavor to advertise the resources of the many local societies. In addition, the state Historical Commission recently published for the Historical Records Survey its *Guide to Manuscript Depositories* which provides an abundance of more detailed information as to the manuscript resources of the various societies. In passing, it is well to emphasize that the Records Survey has great possibilities as a medium for making useful and available the resources of the local historical societies of the United States. The local historical society should neither be scorned nor neglected by those interested in American history.

Turning to the field of statewide historical organization, one finds little upon which to base an organized analysis. Important as it is, little attention appears to have been devoted to the problem how best to organize and support a program to promote state history. What has been accomplished in the field is the result in each state of a rather haphazard and aimless development. One has but to glance through the history of several state historical organizations selected at random to appreciate this fact.

In the older Atlantic seaboard states the privately supported state historical society type of organization is still prevalent and predominant. It is especially powerful in New England. All of these societies are today venerable with age and have behind them a splendid tradition of service to the cause of state and local history. In most cases there is no reliance by these societies upon
any governmental assistance in their endeavors, though Rhode Island reports an annual subsidy of $1,500. The Delaware Historical Society is the recipient of $300 annually for publication. These state societies possess in many cases important documentary collections as well as libraries. To a limited extent they may be regarded as museums, though the collecting and publishing of data bearing upon state history is the prime function.

From contacts with these agencies and other sources of information, the writer is inclined to the view that the privately supported state society securing its funds from membership and endowments at present is apt to suffer certain disadvantages. In the first place, there is a constant struggle for existence in terms of funds to support the program. Furthermore, these societies are apt to be dominated by the energies of a few persons and quite frequently may be criticized as failing to recognize the importance of public services. They are apt to be dominated in points of historical interest and activity by the community in which headquarters has been established and possess little contact and perform few services for the state as a whole. The existence of such societies is usually accompanied by the independent exercise of certain important historical functions by the state government including particularly the conduct of a state archives. Since these form a most important foundation for the writing of any state history, the private society is automatically limited in usefulness.

Indeed, the evidence seems to indicate that a majority of the eastern states have discovered already the importance of some state aid to historical endeavor. In New York, the Department of Archives and History as a part of the Department of Education functions with a State Historian and a Supervisor of Public Records. It has become an important agency in promoting New York state history and acts to a limited extent through at least personal contacts as a coördinating agent with the New York State Historical Association and other privately supported groups.

Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and South Carolina have seen fit to establish state Historical Commissions to represent the state in matters historical. The connection of the Pennsylvania Commission with the historical societies has already been mentioned. This Commission is also active in the administration of state owned historical properties such as the recently restored memorial home of William Penn on the Delaware. It has a series of
archaeological and historical publications and sponsors research and study in these fields. It has charge of the historical markers program for the state. It is seriously interested in promoting the study of state and local history in the schools of the state. It has made extensive use of the WPA for historical and archaeological research in Pennsylvania.

The North Carolina Commission is also active in publishing state history and has a distinctive record in this respect. Its executive secretary acts also as secretary of a State Historical and Literary Association and provides opportunity thereby for coördination of state and private endeavor. Unlike the Pennsylvania Commission, it maintains a museum in the form of a Hall of History, and also administers the state archives. The latter is characterized as "the most important single phase of its work." In South Carolina, archival records are under the state Commission but it does not report museum functions. In Pennsylvania, the state archives and museum are independent and a part of the State Library.

State Departments of Archives and History are to be found in West Virginia, Alabama and Mississippi. The nature of their work is rather completely indicated by their official designation. The collection of historical data and its publication is the prime objective of these departments. West Virginia reports that its privately supported historical society has lapsed, while in Alabama the state society appears to be largely dependent upon the state Department of Archives and History. The Departments appear to coöperate to a limited degree with local societies.

Similar types of state historical agencies have found root in some other states. Michigan energizes its program by means of the Michigan Historical Commission supported by a rather generous biennial appropriation. The Commission is responsible for the collection of books, documents and manuscripts relating to the history of Michigan and it also maintains a state museum. The Michigan historical legislation is distinctive in that it specifically authorizes the Commission to aid and coöperate with local societies, thereby recognizing that the duty of the state government goes beyond the maintenance of a state agency. It should be widely copied.

Iowa possesses an Historical, Memorial and Art Department which acts directly in these fields as an agency of the state govern-
ment. This is supplemented by state aid to the Iowa Historical Society which is privately incorporated and maintained by membership dues and other sources of private income. Indiana has created an Historical Bureau as a division of the Department of Education, thereby following the New York system. The Indiana Historical Society is privately maintained, but reports close cooperation with the Historical Bureau, though it receives no state financial support. The museum and archives divisions of the state government, however, are independent of the Bureau. Idaho has a state historical department exercising museum functions. The Idaho State Historical Society also receives state assistance and has become responsible for the archives. Recent reports express dissatisfaction with the amount of state support and indicate that contact with local historical agencies is severely limited.

The prevalent form of state historical organization in the western states combines the incorporated state historical society with indirect state subsidy. The usual method of accomplishing this has been through legislative enactment making the state society the agent of the state government in developing historical collections and providing for publications. The governing board of trustees includes the governor and usually two other key state officials as ex officio members, or provides for appointment of a minority of the board by the governor. State funds are then legally appropriated for the use of the state society. A review of the history of several state societies reveals that this arrangement usually has been the result of a realization of state responsibility for assistance following the creation of privately organized societies after the eastern model. The typical western state society dates back to the days of territorial status, indicating a lively historical interest upon the part of the pioneers. The cooperative arrangement with the later state government was a logical development and a most fortunate one for the future of state history. The emergence of these organizations early in the history of these states has given them an enviable position as depositories as well as leadership in the field of state historical publications.

The distinguished State Historical Society of Wisconsin is typical of the western contribution to state historical organization. Its Handbook reveals that its organization dates back to 1846, following agitation during the territorial period. State officials were active in the organization from the beginning and a small state
appropriation was available. The governor, state treasurer and secretary of state are by statute members of the executive committee of the Board of Trustees. Individual membership provides a basic foundation for the society’s existence. All society holdings are held in trust for the state and the society is to all intents and purposes a branch of the state government. A majority of the local historical societies are members of the state society. The collections and work of the society and its distinguished leaders are too well known to need discussion.

With minor modifications, this is the prevailing type of historical organization among what might be termed the newer western states. It has come to be regarded by a large proportion of those interested in such matters as the ideal type of state historical organization. The advantages of freedom from any political or bureaucratic control are maintained, and yet the welcome bounty of funds from a state tax-filled treasury is assured. Of course this does not assure the historians that they will secure everything they desire—if indeed that is a goal which ever may be reached—but it is more promising today than a private source of income. It is apt to become even more important an advantage in the future with the present tendency toward the decline of private philanthropy. The arrangement has assured the presence of a very high type of personnel on the staffs of the societies. It is productive of a degree of regard for the public responsibility of the historical society which is sometimes lacking in the purely private organization. The library, archival and publications responsibilities of this type of society are apt to be well carried out. Individual membership and responsibility in society management and affairs is preserved with consequent assurance of a statewide interest in the historical program.

It is with these varied types of statewide historical organization that the states attempt to promote their respective historical interests. It is evident that there is not too much unity of practice for the nation as a whole. In many cases there is apparent a distressing lack of cooperation between the central or state agency and the various local groups. In those states where some type of state subsidy for historical work exists, it is evident from the comments of those in charge that there is a woeful inadequacy of funds. There are few states which have devoted satisfactory sums to the promotion of state history and not more than half a dozen
could be cited in any list of honorable mention for distinctive support. In at least one state, Nevada, such support has been entirely withdrawn in recent years.

In view of the growing recognition of the value of state and local history as the foundation of the proper understanding of our national development, it must be said that much remains to be done to bring state and local historical agencies abreast of the times. A candid survey on a national scale does not leave one with a feeling of confidence that existing agencies as at present organized and conducted are capable of meeting satisfactorily the challenge presented and the new responsibilities imposed upon them. The historians of the United States need to give heed to this problem and devote serious attention to the upbuilding of these agencies if the needs of future historical writing and research are to be met.

The most basic need is that of additional financial support. Ways and means of increasing endowments of the private societies must be discovered. State aid for historical publications and the maintenance of archives and museums is too niggardly and should be increased in a majority of states. The historical agencies are severely handicapped in meeting the responsibility placed upon them by lack of funds. This appears to be a problem especially in those states which do not possess a well developed state society. This would lead to the conclusion that a closer federation or union of local historians and agencies within the several states capable of calling to public attention the necessary financial needs of local history is advisable. It is reasonable to suppose that better support from either state legislatures or public contributions would be the result.

It appears to the writer that few historical agencies realize the importance of promoting the use of state and local history in the public schools. In fact several representatives seem to feel that anything of this sort is futile and worthless. Nebraska is a shining exception. Dr. Sheldon's *Nebraska Old and New* is utilized as a text in the schools of the state. North Carolina, Ohio, New Mexico and Iowa have been somewhat active in considering this problem. The closer cooperation of historical agencies with state education departments would be advisable. This does not mean that state history should take precedence over that of the United States in any state. It does mean that the demands of good citizen-
ship include some knowledge of state and local historical back-
grounds. It is probable further that this approach to history will
result in greater appreciation and a keener interest upon the part
of school children and teachers who today regard it as dull and are
relegating it to the background in the social studies program.

Historical agencies should realize more fully their public
responsibilities. Societies should not be run for the benefit of a
few or a limited area. It is up to the state and local historical
society to arouse popular interest in history. Too many societies
are literally shut-ins in dry and dusty buildings, which have never
been visited by any large number of the citizenry. As a rule, the
most difficult place for a stranger to locate anywhere is the his-
torical building. This is not as it should be. A greater public
service arousing public interest would certainly pay rich dividends
in more private support and ultimately in public aid. A majority
of societies and agencies need to cultivate a greater public knowl-
edge of and appreciation for their services.

It is a small wonder, however, that those who consider these
problems meet with so little success in their solution. In every
state where any considerable number of societies exist there should
be some federated or associated agency to induce coöperative
approach to these problems. A synthesis of historical activity is
badly needed in most states.

Furthermore, we need a synthesis of activity and thought on a
national scale. There is need for some national association of
those connected with this important field of work. The problems
of those in charge of state or local historical work in California,
Kansas, Maine, Alabama and Pennsylvania are much the same.
Much of value in the exchange of ideas and information as to an
approach to these matters could be gained from closer association
of both individuals and organizations.

If we accept the view that state and local history are a vital
part of our national tradition, the need for a national approach to
a consideration of the proper development of state and local his-
torical agencies and programs is very real. Are we not now at a
point where the coordination and association of state and local
historians and societies is an absolute necessity if those individuals
and associations are to meet the responsibilities of the new history?