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THE REDISCOVERY OF LOCAL HISTORY

Willard B. Gatewood, Jr.

U ntil recently, historians and archivists shared a common family tree, and even though specialization and professionalization may have obscured ancestral ties, historians are still very much aware that archivists hold the keys to the documentary kingdom upon which they rely for the study and writing of history. For both to function at maximum efficiency, each must maintain acquaintance with the interests of the other. This paper comments on a significant development within the historical profession which, for lack of a more glamorous title, could be called "the rediscovery of local history."

The writing of American history, of course, began with the chronicling of local events by amateurs. By the outbreak of the Revolution, in fact, localism dominated historical writing. Each colony by that time had recorded its own history as an independent unit of the British empire. But the war for independence inspired a new kind of history in America--national history. This new type was further stimulated in the 1820s by the celebration of the semi-centennial of the Revolution, when Congress enacted a law designating college and public libraries throughout the country as depositories of documents of the general government. This law made available a uniform body of federal records, which provided the point of departure for many historians. In contrast, no comparable concentration of local sources existed. But this is not to imply any sudden demise of local history. Indeed, just the opposite. Local, as well as state, historical studies proliferated

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from the 1790s on, in part because of a desire to ensure that a particular locality got its due recognition in national chronicles. In the 1840s a new generation of local historians emerged who viewed the earlier filio-pietistic works with skepticism and dedicated themselves to exposing the "historical jackdaws" of their elders. The result was an elevation of the level of scholarship in local historical studies and substantial improvement in methods of collecting, evaluating and editing documents.

From the Revolution to the Civil War, no real conflict existed between love of one's locality and love of one's country. The nationalism that inspired Fourth-of-July orations in the pre-Civil War era "made few demands on local loyalty." But with the outbreak of the Civil War, the choice between local loyalty and duty to the nation-state became a critical issue, one that wrought havoc among the nationalist historians. During the war, and for some years afterwards, the mission of the historian, so it seemed, was to justify a cause and claim a share of glory for a particular section, town, county, state, regiment or individual.

In 1876, amid celebrations of the nation's centennial, the North and South began the long journey on the road to spiritual reunion. But the writing of the history of the newly unified country was not to be dominated by local amateurs or independent gentlemen. It was taken over by academic professionals such as Herbert Baxter Adams and J. Franklin Jameson who were nationalists by training. The emphasis on the evolution of the nation-state in German universities, where many Americans had been educated, profoundly influenced their approach to the study of history. Almost by necessity, as David Van Tassel has noted, the new professional historians gave their allegiance to the nation, since they had severed, or seriously weakened, their local roots by taking up a profession that could only be practiced in widely scattered academic communities and that often involved a succession of moves during the course of a career. It was these new professionals of the "scientific school" who organized the American Historical Association (AHA) in 1884, an event which signaled the triumph of national history. Nor was its significance lost upon amateurs and local historians, those called "quasi-historians" by Adams. One of them complained that the subjects discussed at meetings of the AHA were of no interest to him and that the association appeared "to be

run in the interest of college professors only and to give those of us who are not of that clan the cold shoulder"--a commentary on a condition which has persisted throughout much of the twentieth century.¹

Increasingly, the burden of writing local history fell to non-academic historians or amateurs whose works continued to develop along lines that emerged in the pre-Civil War decade. Professionals often dismissed these efforts as little more than antiquarianism writ large. Typical of the academic historians' attitude was the observation of a scholar in 1914 who characterized books on local history as "so much dead weight on library shelves; vexatious to the student because of their disorderliness and wordiness, lacking most of what histories should contain, and containing much that histories should omit."² Other critics, no less devastating, castigated such histories as exercises in local piety and ancestor worship, displaying few, if any, of the attributes of "scientific" scholarship and presented as if their subject matter was wholly unrelated to anything outside its narrow confines. Such criticism, repeated over the years, placed a stigma upon the study of local history within academe, where such activity came to be viewed as "pedestrian and stagnating to professional scholarship." The widely held belief was that a research topic, if it was to have any value and make any contribution to knowledge, had to be national, or at least regional, in scope. Since many American historians accepted this assumption, they ignored research opportunities in local history which lay close at hand.

Of course, not all academic historians scorned local history. Among those who continued research in the field were such luminaries as Herbert E. Bolton. In fact, a recent study of Bolton claims that local history played a basic role in the formulation of his famous synthesis, noting that significantly the Bolton thesis of hemispheric unity developed after, not before, a long period of monographic study of local topics.³

Only during the last two decades has the status of local history risen within academic circles to the level at which Bolton placed it. The process began in the 1950s, and before the decade was over the AHA had added a new pamphlet--Philip D. Jordon, *The Nature and Practice of Local History* (1958)--to its bibliographical series. The year before its publication, in 1957, Professor Charles Sellers, a specialist in Jacksonian politics, chastized

historians for their "indifference to the local and particular ends that are often the springs of political behavior." Such indifference, he argued, had "shrouded much of our political history in a pervasive unreality." Sellers concluded: "The Jackson movement originated in a curious amalgam of local machinations by obscure politicians and broad national developments. The political system thus imposed on the country has continued to rest on just such an amalgam. We shall never understand the system and its history adequately so long as able scholars confine themselves to Congressional and Cabinet level materials, while regarding investigation at the base of political life as work for inferior talents."⁴ Such sentiments, expressed with increasing frequency by the end of the 1950s, indicated the beginnings of a renaissance within academe of local history, a field characterized by H. P. R. Finberg as "the Cinderella of historical studies" who had not yet achieved first-class citizenship among professionals.

Then, in the 1960s, there emerged "the New England School of Local History," made up largely of students of Professor Bernard Bailyn of Harvard and influenced by the demographic studies of local historians in Britain and France. The monographs of the New England School, which focus on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century villages and townships, principally concern changes in family structure, the shifting relationships between land and population, and alterations in government. Through research in wills, deeds, court and church documents, these scholars have discovered essential clues to factional alignments and to changes in the economic and political bases of New England towns.⁶ In a recent study of Salem, Massachusetts, for example, Paul Boyer and Philip Nissenbaum,⁷ gleaned clues from the seemingly barren listings of names in local records. Their findings point to an escalating factional struggle centered in two families, one representing the declining agricultural interests and the other the rising mercantile interests, which, they argue, provides the key to comprehending the bizarre incidents in the town in 1692. In short, they see the witchcraft episodes as "rooted in the particularly tortured history of one village as it tried to come to grips with the larger forces of historical change overtaking the western world."

While the New England school may constitute an identifiable group in terms of subject matter and research

technique, local history has been acquiring a new respectability throughout the nation. In 1963, for example, the Southern Historical Association bestowed upon Edward Phifer, a surgeon and amateur historian, its prestigious Ramsdell Award for his article concerning slavery in the non-staple producing area of Burke County, North Carolina.⁸ Since then, professional historians have studied the same topic in local settings throughout the South. In his survey of graduate education in American history completed in the late 1960s, Walter Rundell concluded that even if professional historians had not then taken full advantage of the rich variety of local sources, at least they had begun to appreciate their significance.⁹ By 1974, however, David J. Russo could maintain in his *Families and Communities* that "local history is now fully in the mainstream of American historical writing"--an observation that appears to be justified by the outpouring of papers, articles and books by professionals which deal directly with localized topics and by numerous treatises on the pedagogical uses of local historical sources.

In an attempt to explain this renaissance of local history among academic historians during the late 1950s and 1960s, Thomas H. Smith¹⁰ of Ohio University points to two groups of inter-related developments. The first group were developments within the profession including the introduction of new research methods, such as quantitative analysis which is particularly applicable to the study of local communities and institutions, and the recognition and amplification of fields for historical study that were once considered inconsequential or treated only incidentally, such as blacks, women, and the family. The second were events and developments outside the profession, especially during the 1960s, which raised questions relating to the search for identity by various minority groups--the exploitation of both the individual and the environment, the purpose and meaning of urbanization, the place of violence in a democratic society, the role of special interest groups and individuals in the decision making process, and the idea of governance. In an attempt to provide insight into these issues, historians began to explore the local past, because, as Smith explains, "it is at this level that a synthesis of the individual's place in the historic processes can best be understood." It is also at this level that the subject matter becomes less abstract and less impersonal and that a peculiar intimacy is likely to exist between the historian and his subject. For those inclined

to dismiss local history as a field suitable only for dealers in minutiae, the observation made many years ago by Alfred North Whitehead may be enlightening: "We think in generalities," he remarked, "but we live in detail. To make the past live, we must perceive it in detail, in addition to thinking of it in generalities."¹¹ More recently, Russell Fridley has noted that research in local history is especially feasible in our own time, because its closeness to the human situation and its manageable area of concentration tend to resist the dehumanization which plagues so much specialization. Moreover, local history often can "be validated with a precision lacking in wider ranging subjects."¹²

Aside from whatever values it may claim as its own, local history has all the values associated with history generally. It helps in understanding present problems and human predicaments, furnishes perspective on how we got where we are, and teaches us, or ought to teach us, humility by reminding us how transitory a particular civilization or society really is. Unfortunately, some local historians have labored under the misconception that, in the United States, society was static, or as one scholar has noted, they concentrated upon "a midget rather than upon a growing man--a man who by necessity must be part of a social group and who is conditioned by a host of factors quite outside his restricted backyard."¹³ Furthermore, the scope and dimensions of a localized topic can be deceptive and are rarely what they seem to be at first sight, for as Arthur Lovejoy once remarked: "The more you press toward the heart of a narrowly bounded historical problem, the more likely you are to encounter in the problem itself a pressure which drives you outward beyond these bounds."¹⁴ Local history, rather than being self-contained, is always "part of something larger" and therefore must be explored within broader contexts. No one, for example, could undertake a serious study of the crisis involving Little Rock's Central High School without considerable attention to the regional and national dimensions of the episode. The failure of local historians to appreciate the inter-relatedness of the past goes far toward explaining why so much of their work has been of limited value. Their attempts to write exclusively in terms of the local, "to act as time were rigid and a topic self-contained," seriously flawed their perception of historical reality.

An acquaintance with the broader sweep of human events is no less essential to the understanding of the history of a particular locality than a knowledge of local history is to an understanding of the nation's past. J. Frank Dobie was obviously right when he declared that "to study a provincial setting from a provincial point of view is restricting." Such a point of view is virtually inevitable, Dobie argued, unless the local historian acquires the perspective that "only a good deal of literature and wide history can give."¹⁵ Local history assumes significance and meaning to the degree that the practitioner recognizes the microcosmic nature of his subject, sees it as one of many individual threads in a large and intricate tapestry, and comprehends its intimate relationship with other threads and with the total pattern of the whole tapestry.

Clearly, if history is to have meaning outside the profession, indeed if it is to have pedagogical value at all, the historian "must accomplish the difficult task of relating the effects of the national experience to the individual, while at the same time placing the individual in perspective to that same national experience." War, depression, elections, prosperity, industrialization and the like constitute common national experiences which operate at all levels in American society, but it is at the local level that such experiences actually have meaning for the individual.¹⁶ Not the least of the considerations in determining how the individual identifies with, or reacts to, these commonly shared experiences is his place of residence, which, in turn, affects his value system, position in the social structure, and other ingredients in his reaction process. Because of the critical role played by local environment in such a process, the British writer Reginald Hine suspects that human life is "more vividly seen refracted through" the experience of a single parish.¹⁷

Historians can never view the whole of the facts, as James C. Malin has noted, but they at least strive to "view the facts as a whole." Of course, the larger the unit of space being studied, the greater the volume of facts and the more complex their relationships. Generalizations, therefore, are necessary, but those predicated solely upon a view of the past "from the top down" tend to oversimplify, if not distort, historical processes. No one is likely to be more sensitive to the inadequacy of such generalization than those who have explored history at the local level. They are in a position to come nearer the ideal of dealing with their area, its materials and its

facts as a whole than historians at any other level. In so doing, they can test the generalizations and frames of reference "made from the top down" and expose them as either valid or invalid representations of historical reality.¹⁸

A growing awareness on the part of professional scholars of the value of looking at American history "from the bottom up" has resulted in numerous local historical studies which provide extraordinary insight into the national experience. Such studies have prompted major alterations in, and added new dimensions to, existing interpretations of the national experience. Certainly the "grass roots" investigations undertaken during the past eighteen years have done much to rid political history of the shroud of unreality to which Charles Sellers alluded in the 1950s. Of particular significance has been the contribution of scholars, such as Samuel P. Hays, who have turned away from the individual and episodic in political history to a "social analysis of political life," an approach concerned principally with the distribution of power among "various distinct groupings and their changing interrelationships." To determine the "basic patterns of political life and the impulses which spring from them," these historians are exploiting vast quantities of information concerning occupations, incomes, residential locations and the like. They maintain that the traditional analysis of political history has rested primarily on rhetoric, which may well reflect "what people wish to think about themselves and their society, but it does not describe what they do." In a report to the Society of American Archivists in the mid-1960s, Hays himself pointed out that the "social analysis of politics" and its concern for behavioral, rather than ideological, evidence had two implications of especial significance. First, it implied a renewed interest in local history, since "patterns of political structure and political process inevitably develop in a local setting"; second, it implied that professional historians must assume a new attitude toward genealogy. Since the "new" political history emphasizes collective, rather than individual, biography, it requires all the information possible concerning the ancestry, as well as descendants, of those who ran for and held office and who occupied niches in party organizations. Obviously, then, Hays and others of his genre find the records of local historical societies and local governments and collections of genealogical data indispensable to their labors.¹⁹

In few areas, however, has the impact of those engaged in local historical research been more significant than in the study of progressivism, the multifaceted, complex reform efforts of the early twentieth century. During the past decade, most of the important publications on progressivism have been works in local and state history. These studies have resulted in substantial revisions in the interpretations of Richard Hofstadter and George Mowry, who depicted progressivism as an urban, middle-class reform movement which ended with the First World War. Recent investigators, especially those focusing on various localities in California, Wisconsin and New York, indicate that diverse groups outside the middle class played far more important roles than credited by Mowry and Hofstadter. Apparently progressivism, rather than terminating in 1918, persisted throughout the 1920s.²⁰

In recent years there has been much agitation for historians to concern themselves with what is called the "underside of history," that is, with people of low historical visibility who often left few, if any, personal records. The argument is made that historians have too long pursued an elitist history, or tended to utilize the more obvious and readily available sources. [Since it is the papers of the prominent, the articulate and the posterity-conscious which have been preserved, it is from these sources--and from the viewpoint contained therein--that the past most often has been constructed.] The plea to concern ourselves with the "underside of history" has a special relevance to local history, because, as J. H. Plumb has observed, one of the distinctive characteristics of local history is its immediacy--its tendency to bring "us face to face with ordinary men and women."²¹ Such a tendency is evident in recent works of scholars such as Stephan Thernstrom, whose study of Newburyport, Massachusetts, which rests on prodigious research in census schedules and local government records, focuses on the "lives of hundreds of obscure men" who were participants in what is generally called "the rise of the city." Thernstrom's study lends support to the idea that Americans are a restless, highly mobile people. But it seriously questions the corollary that movement and success go hand in hand. Geographic mobility, he concludes, was often as much a sign of downward, as of upward, social mobility.²² Thernstrom, of course, is only one of a growing number of historians whose sophisticated investigations of local communities concentrate on such issues as

migration, immigration, class stratification, stability and social mobility. Their studies are expanding our concept of the nature of nineteenth century American society and challenging, or at least substantially amending, popular generalizations about it.

Towns and cities have not monopolized the attention of professional historians. Rural counties, too, have become the subjects of sophisticated research. It is noteworthy that a grass-roots study of a frontier county in Wisconsin, compiled by a team of researchers headed by Merle Curti and published in 1959,²³ served as a model and inspiration for Thernstrom's project on Newburyport.

Some of the most exciting research now in progress concerns Afro-Americans who, like certain other groups, have hitherto possessed a relatively low historical profile, except under such topics as slavery and race relations. Many works classified as black history are not so much studies of blacks as of white involvement with blacks, and they rest almost exclusively upon research in white sources. Many, if not most, of the current explorations of the Afro-American past fall within the category of local history. They focus on black men and women in a specific locality and their relationships to local environments at particular times. Moreover, they involve impressive research in Afro-American sources, notwithstanding categorical statements by some historians a few years ago to the effect that such sources were practically non-existent.

Although there are superb studies of black communities in the North by Allan Spear, Seth Schiener and others, three recent works which treat the subject in southern and southwestern settings, and which demonstrate imaginative uses of local and state records, deserve special note. One, a book by William Warren Rogers and Robert Ward entitled *August Reckoning*, analyzes the career of Jack Turner, a black leader in rural Choctaw County, Alabama, in the post-Civil War decades. Utilizing Turner as a symbol, the authors succeed admirably in what they call "a microcosmic illumination of racial conditions in the postwar South."²⁴ A similar illumination is provided by Randall B. Woods' recent article on George T. Ruby, a black carpetbagger and state senator from Galveston in the 1870s. Woods reconstructs the political career of a black man who, by faithfully serving the economic interests of Galveston's white business community, enjoyed wide latitude in pressing the cause of

civil rights for black Texans.²⁵ Finally, Lawrence Goodwyn's study of biracial politics which, like Woods', focuses on the cellular structure of the historical process, is set in Grimes County, Texas, where the local historical society assisted in the acquisition of data. Goodwyn's essay demonstrates the possibilities in using oral traditions to "flesh out the human relationship" through which black and white men came together to form a remarkably durable political organization in a southern rural county--relationships only dimly revealed by the "bare bones of voting totals." Through his study, Goodwyn seriously challenges the adequacy of what he calls the traditional monoracial scholarship which rests on the assumption that reform politics in the South is an exclusive function of whites.²⁶

One of the richest sources of Afro-American history at the local level, as demonstrated by recent monographs, is the black press. In the South and Southwest, numerous black newspapers were published following the Civil War. Some flourished for a few months or a few years, others survived for decades. But files of these journals were rarely preserved. Fortunately, however, black weeklies in the North and Midwest, relatively complete files of which have been saved, opened their columns to correspondents in the South. In the 1880s and 1890s, the editors of such weeklies recognized that the prosperity of their enterprises depended upon subscriptions in the South where an overwhelming majority of blacks then lived. Convinced that news about local communities in the South would enhance the sale of their newspapers there, these editors not only arranged for individuals residing in towns and hamlets throughout the region to serve as subscription agents and correspondents, but also kept "traveling agents" in the field. The dispatches filed by local correspondents constitute an invaluable source of information about black reaction to the spread of Jim Crowism and about diverse aspects of life in southern black communities not easily obtained elsewhere, certainly not in the local white press. Despite an emphasis on the "Race Question," southern dailies afforded little data on black communities of the type found in the black journals of the North and Midwest--data which historians concerned with race relations in the South have unfortunately ignored.²⁷

Local studies in black history and other topics not only contribute to the broader historical tapestry, but also frequently lead investigators into larger and larger

arenas. Pursuing such a progression reveals the absurdity of any hierarchy in historical work which makes local history inferior to state history, state history to regional history, regional history to national history. The simple fact is that these are interdependent enterprises, each drawing upon and contributing to the other.

The issue is not one of national history versus local history, or a national perspective versus a local perspective. The two are complementary, and each enriches and deepens our understanding of the past. Both are essential if we are to avoid a one-dimensional view of the past and appreciate fully the rich diversity of the United States. Essentially, local history confronts the historian with two challenges: one lies in recognizing the significance of local sources (and probably archivists have been considerably more responsive in this respect than historians); the other lies in recognizing the interrelatedness of a localized topic and the wider historical panorama. Archivists and research historians cannot afford to ignore J. Frank Dobie's wise counsel that nothing is too provincial for the historian, but the historian "cannot be provincial-minded toward it."²⁸

FOOTNOTES

¹These paragraphs are based largely upon David Van Tassel, *Recording America's Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), and George H. Calcott, *History in the United States, 1800-1860: Its Practice and Purpose* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970).

²H. P. R. Finberg, *The Local Historian and His Theme* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1965), 3.

³Martha Voght, "Herbert Eugene Bolton As a Writer of Local History," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LXXII (January, 1969), 313-323.

⁴Charles G. Sellers, "Jackson Men With Feet of Clay," *American Historical Review*, LXII (April, 1957), 55.

⁵Finberg, *The Local Historian*, 3.

⁶Lawrence Stone, "English and United States Local History," *Daedalus*, C (Winter, 1971), 131-132.

⁷Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

⁸Edward W. Phifer, "Slavery in Microcosm: Burke County, North Carolina," *Journal of Southern History*, XXVIII (May, 1962), 137-165.

⁹Walter Rundell, Jr., *In Pursuit of American History: Research and Training in the United States* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), Chapter V.

¹⁰This paper has drawn generously upon the work of Thomas H. Smith, "The Renaissance of Local History," *The Historian*, XXV (November, 1972), 1-17; Walter Muir Whitehill "Local History in the United States," *Times Literary Supplement*, LXIX (November, 1970), 1331-1333; Lee A. Dew, "The 'Professional' Historian and Local History," *Louisiana History*, XII (Spring, 1971), 167-175; and Clifford Lord, *Teaching History With Community Resources* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1964), Chapter I.

¹¹Quoted in Phifer, "Slavery in Microcosm," 137.

¹²Russell W. Fridley, "Local History and World Upheaval," *Minnesota History*, XLI (Winter, 1968), 173-174.

¹³Philip D. Jordan, *The Nature and Practice of Local History* (Washington: American Historical Association, 1958), 7.

¹⁴Quoted in Phifer, "Slavery in Microcosm," 158.

¹⁵Whitehill, "Local History in the United States," 1333.

¹⁶Smith, "Renaissance of Local History," 15.

¹⁷Quoted in Whitehill, "Local History in the United States," 1333.

¹⁸James C. Malin, "On the Nature of Local History," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XL (Summer, 1957), 227-230.

¹⁹See Samuel P. Hays, "Archival Sources for American Political History," *American Archivist*, XXVIII (January, 1965), 17-23.

²⁰Arthur S. Link, "Contemporary History," in Louis L. Tucker, ed., *The Challenge of Local History* (Albany: New York Department of Education, 1968), 76-77.

²¹Quoted in Fridley, "Local History and World Upheaval," 174.

²²See Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).

²³*The Making of an American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier County* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959).

²⁴William Warren Rogers and Robert Ward, *August Reckoning: Jack Turner and Racism in Post-Civil War Alabama* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973).

²⁵Randall B. Woods, "George T. Ruby: Black Militant in the White Business Community," *Red River Valley Historical Review*, I (Autumn, 1974), 269-279.

²⁶Lawrence Goodwyn, "Populist Dreams and Negro Rights: East Texas as a Case Study," *American Historical Review*, LXXVI (December, 1971), 1435-1456.

²⁷See Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., "Arkansas Negroes in the 1890's: Documents," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, XXXIII (Winter, 1974), 293-325.

²⁸Quoted in Whitehill, "Local History in the United States," 1333.