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Of Wholes and Parts: Local History and the American Experience

Terry A. Barnhart

The relationships between the wholes and parts of American history are vital to our understanding of ourselves as a nation and a people. Many of the central paradoxes and ambiguities of our national existence cannot be adequately understood without exploring the interplay between localism and nationalism that runs like a *leitmotiv* throughout American history. The influence of the westward movement in our nation's past, the give and take of federal-state relations, the internecine sectionalism of the nineteenth century, and the more benign regionalism of the twentieth century raise important questions about the relationship between local history and national heritage, and why they sometimes seem antithetical. As one historian has ably put it,

Essentially American history is the account of local communities strung together to form a composite nation.... The course of history, local or national, has never advanced within a vacuum or without the adhesive element of continuity. So many times past decisions, national and international, resulted from grass roots pressures and demands. In fact the broad spectrum of sectionalism in national history has ever reflected this cause and effect. So many times local historians' books deal with microcosms which are but parts of the broader national scene.¹

It has even been asserted that pivotal events in American history are best understood when studied as a series of local responses to issues and problems that cut across state boundaries, yet were significantly influenced by local conditions.²

¹Thomas D. Clark, "Local History: A Mainspring for National History," in *Local History Today*, ed. Richard Jensen and others (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1979), 47.

²A good example of the micro approach to the national past is *The States and the Nation* series, administered by the American Association for State and Local History under the general editorship of James Morton Smith. These state histories were among the more useful productions of the American bicentennial in 1976—an incredible boon to the writing of American local history. On the impact of the bicentennial and the rebirth of American local history see Michael Kammen, "The American Revolution Bicentennial and the Writing of Local History," *History News* 30 (Aug. 1975): 179-90.

Indeed, the nature of the American experience (if one may speak in the singular) cautions against the artificial segregation of local and national issues. As a student of Illinois' early political history once observed, "[t]he character of the Federal Constitution, and the large place occupied by national policies in the lives of people, make it impossible to divorce local and national issues."³ What is true of the national experience politically is also true socially and culturally. The market revolution occasioned by canals and railroads in the early and mid-nineteenth century, the advent of industrial capitalism and its economies of scale and national patterns of consumption in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the rise of a truly national culture via the communication and transportation revolutions of the last half century have had a homogenizing influence on the patterns of our lives. Yet local historians should avoid assumptions of national homogeneity as diligently as those of local exceptionalism, for one may find concurrent examples of both. Local, regional, inter-regional, national, and global influences connect the parts to the whole in individual lives and their local communities. It is the job of the local historian to reconstruct the symbiotic relationship between the national and local settings of our social and cultural selves.⁴

There are many reciprocal relationships between local and national history, yet recognition of this fact should not obscure the very real differences and intellectual distance that often separate those who identify themselves as "local" and "professional" historians. The rift has a history behind it. It stems from differences in the training, interests, and approaches of professional and amateur historians, to say nothing of the underlying assumptions which motivates them to investigate the local past in the first instance. Amateur and professional historians departed at wide angles when the historical profession emerged as a self-conscious and credentialed academic discipline in the 1880s. Gone was the great commons of history, where avocational historians of various backgrounds and attainments

³Charles Manfred Thompson, *The Illinois Whigs Before 1846* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1915), 113.

⁴See David Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, "Nearby History: Connecting Particulars and Universals," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 8 (Spring 1983): 3-10.

wrote local and national histories for a general readership. The concerns of academically trained historians centered around the history of national political issues, parties, and presidential administrations, while local history remained a stepchild to the profession—a pursuit open to amateurs but largely anathema to the history professional at large. There have been many efforts to mitigate that estrangement, but the burden of the past continues to loom large.

One may be appreciative of local history without being uncritical, for there are many problems associated with its practice. It is undeniably true that the province of local history is too often reduced to an enumeration of “firsts,” anniversary celebrations, pageants, and re-creations that rarely rise above the level of chamber-of-commerce-boosterism and expressions of local pride. There has been an inordinate preoccupation with pioneers and first families—what might best be described as the “what-the-pioneers-hath-wrought” school of historiography, where the community-building enterprises of the first Euro-American settlers in a locality are described in Promethean terms, and further embellished with filio piety. To recognize the problems inherent in this genre of historical writing should not, however, minimize the contributions of the more diligent and talented among the early chroniclers of the local past. Indeed, notwithstanding the great historiographical and culture distance that separates the historical profession from its antiquarian origins, our intellectual debt to the amateur historians of the nineteenth century is large. There is much of value in their original contributions to historical documentation, which continue to be information sources for analytical scholars who revisit the copious materials they compiled. The literary efforts of the antiquarians and the historical societies they helped established is a legacy upon which professionally trained historians have often built. All those who labor in the vineyard of local history remain conspicuously in their debt.⁵

⁵See David J. Russo, *Keepers of Our Past: Local Historical Writing in the United States, 1820s-1930s* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1988); and David D. Van Tassel, *Recording America's Past: An Interpretation of the Development of Historical Studies in American, 1607-1884* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

It has been argued, in fact, that professional historians in the United States for too long left the writing of local history to antiquarians and amateurs,⁶ criticizing or rejecting their work but making no offerings to the field of their own. It was left to scholars in Europe and to American social scientists to redirect the attention of American historians to the local past. Social scientists in France and England began applying anthropological concepts of structuralism and the quantitative techniques of demography to the study of pre-industrial communities. The *Annales* group in France, the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure,⁷ and the “Leicester School” of English local history were exploring the deep structures of local societies.⁷ European ideas and techniques for exploring the local past were incorporated into the new social history that emerged in the United States from the various social and political movements of the late 1960s and ‘70s. A new populist history emerged from that historiographical revolution, which included a renewed interest in local history. American scholars utilized “the techniques of ‘place-oriented’ research,” or “community study” as some social historians preferred to call it, to raise new questions and test familiar generalizations about the national experience through a series of truly groundbreaking studies. Community studies as a subfield of historical inquiry had truly

⁶Frank Freidel, ed., *Harvard Guide to American History*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 1: 291.

⁷W.G. Hoskins, *Local History in England*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1972); *idem*, *Fieldwork in Local History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967); H.P.R. Finberg and V.H.T. Skipp, *Local History: Objective and Pursuit* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1967); and Robert Douch, *Local History and the Teacher* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1967).

arrived,⁸ although certain definitional and analytical problems persist.

Not the least of the problems associated with local history has been to adequately define its nature, scope, and purpose. Much of this discussion has centered on the need for integrating state and local history into larger frames of meaning, as an antidote to the provincialism that has been endemic to the field. Historians have long valued the study of localities as a means of testing the validity of more general and theoretical studies of regions or the nation at large. Such case studies attempt to determine the extent to which a community is representative of others in its region and to what degree local experiences have paralleled national trends. Thus one of the many benefits of regional and local history is the capacity for validating, modifying, or refuting many of the grand themes of our national history. Local historians, Clifford L. Lord once respectfully observed, possess an ingrained suspicion or “healthy skepticism about the glib generalization” and an abiding appreciation for the diversity of the American scene.⁹ That localized view of the American experience does not preclude synthesis and generalization, it only circumscribes it within proper boundaries. “Although the diversity of American life in its many separate communities may preclude generalization about social organization throughout America, the historical development of any single community bears a coherence that readily lends itself to a holistic interpretation.”¹⁰ Localized history is an invaluable means of interpreting the complex inner workings of the national

⁸Darrett B. Rutman and Anita H. Rutman, *Small Worlds, Large Questions: Explorations in Early American Social History, 1600-1850* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 16-54 & 287-304; Cary Carson, “Front and Center: Local History Comes of Age,” in *Local History, National Heritage: Reflections on the History of AASLH*, ed. Frederick L. Rath and others (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1991), 85; and James B. Gardner and George Rollie Adams, eds., *Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspective on the New Social History* (Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1983). See also David A. Gerber, “Local and Community History: Some Cautionary Remarks on An Idea Whose Time Has Returned,” *The History Teacher* 13 (Nov. 1979): 124.

⁹Clifford L. Lord, *Teaching History with Community Resources: Localized History Series* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1964), 11.

¹⁰Warren R. Hofstra, “Community Studies: A Real World and the Academic Historian,” *History News* 47 (Nov.–Dec. 1992): 21.

experience, for many of the continuities, countervailing trends, and crosscurrents of that past stand in bold relief when examined in a local context.¹¹

The case-study model of local history is not, however, without its critics. As historians use local history to test hypotheses about the American experience at large something important and distinctive about state and local history is lost along the way. Localism and regionalism under this paradigm is neither presented in the round nor on its own terms, but is made to serve other purposes. As John Alexander Williams has noted, the academic or case-study model of local history is incomplete because it makes the local past serve national history as defined by the academy. This has created a “partial” or a “fragmentary” view of the local past that is inadequate for those who seek a broadly-based cultural history.¹² A distinguishing feature of this history is that it also includes the physical dimensions of the local

¹¹Advocates of the value of local history have articulated numerous strategies for researching and interpreting the local past. See Carol Kammen, ed., *The Pursuit of Local History: Reading on Theory and Practice* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 1996); *idem*, *On Doing Local History: Reflections on What Local Historians Do, Why, and What It Means* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1986); David J. Russo, *Clio Confused: Troubling Aspects of Historical Study from the Perspective of U.S. History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1995); *idem*, *Families and Communities: A New View of American History* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1974); James H. Conrad, *Developing Local History Programs in Community Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1989); Raymond Starr, “The Role of Local History in a Public History Curriculum,” *The Public Historian* 9 (Summer 1987): 80-95; David Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982) and the subsequent volumes of the *Nearby History* series; Edward K. Eckert, “Local History: Everyone’s Hidden Treasure,” *The History Teacher* 13 (Nov. 1979): 31-55; Samuel P. Hayes, “History and the Changing University Curriculum,” *idem* 8 (Nov. 1974); Thomas H. Smith, “The Renaissance of Local History,” *The Historian* 35 (Nov. 1972): 1-17; George Rollie Adams, “Planning for the Future, AASLH Takes a Look at its Past,” *History News* 37 (Sept. 1982): 12-8; Larry E. Tise, “State and Local History: A Future from the Past,” *The Public Historian* 1 (Summer 1979), 14-22; the special issue of that journal devoted to local history, *idem*, 5 (Fall 1983): 7-96; and Constance McLaughlin Greene, “The Value of Local History,” in *The Cultural Approach to History*, ed. Caroline Ware (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 275-86.

¹²John Alexander Williams, “Public History and Local History: An Introduction,” *The Public Historian* 5 (Fall 1983): 8-16.

past—the things of history.¹³ It is hard to imagine, in fact, how state and local history could retain its sense of immediacy and intrinsic appeal with the material past left out. Public audiences in particular often prefer the particular, the personal, and the real over the theoretical paradigms of the scholar, and have their interests most fully engaged by the physical realities of local history. Their attention more readily turns to the commercial, high-style, and vernacular architecture found in American towns and cities. They delight in traveling along the historic and scenic routes that radiate off our interstate highways, where they seek out the last vestiges of prehistoric Indian mounds, roadside gas stations and groceries, and the town squares, courthouses, and places of worship that have mercifully escaped the leveling hand of “improvement.” These are the physical realities of the local past that define a sense of place wherever people have gathered themselves into community. These are the vistas of history *in situ*—the social and material environments that rivet our attention as local historians.

Yet broader vistas are also required of local historians. The comparative study of states and regions offer them yet another angle from which to view the interplay between national and subnational events, trends, and long-term processes. As James H. Madison observes in *Heartland: Comparative Histories of Midwestern States* (1988), the comparative approach to state history “with its nested, three-layered approach of state, region, and nation, mitigates the provincialism of much state history.” It further allows us to recognize, he argues, the importance of understanding the local and regional diversity that still exists within the United States.

Assumptions of homogeneity are omnipresent in twentieth-century America, particularly in the popular culture of music, dress, and food and in the national sweep of television news and entertainment. The common assumption of foreigners that Americans are all

¹³The literature on material culture studies and its relationship to local history is too extensive to cite here. A good place to start is Thomas J. Schlereth, *Cultural History and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, [and] Museums* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: U.M.I. Research Press, 1990); and *idem*, “Above Ground Archaeology: Discovering a Community’s History Through Local Artifacts,” in *Local History Today*, ed. Richard Jensen and others (Indianapolis: The Indiana Historical Society, 1979).

alike is not surprising. Many Americans themselves only think in national and international contexts and to avoid strong attachments to place as they strive for career and geographical mobility.¹⁴

Local historians, therefore, should neither seek distinctiveness nor sameness as ends unto themselves, but inquire into the presence of both. Yet unquestionably they manifest a preference for the particular to the general, and seek to know the nuances of localities and the shared sense of community.

A further antidote to provincialism in local history is the concept of regionalism. In fact, much of what is generally called state and local history is actually regional and even inter-regional in its scope and content.¹⁵ When historians speak of regionalism, they usually mean something more than the common political origins of contiguous states, and something less than absolute uniformity in characteristics. A region need not be unique in all its characteristics, say in its demographic profile, in order to have an historically and culturally defined character and shared identity. Differences *within* a region and similarities *between* regions of the United States are often the rule and not the exception. But rather regionalism makes the people, institutions, politics, literature, and culture of an historically defined region the categories of historical analysis. New England, the South, the Midwest, the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains, the Southwest, California and the Northwest Coast are *relatively* homogeneous. They do have distinct historical patterns of development and distinguishing characteristics, including distinct regional identities. As Louis Worth has noted, regionalism also embraces the province of perceptual geography—place as a “state of mind”

¹⁴James Madison, *Heartland: Comparative Histories of Midwestern States* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

¹⁵Philip D. Jordon, *The Nature and Practice of State and Local History* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, Service Center for Teacher of History, 1958), 12-3. Jordon well stated the interrelationships between the wholes and parts of American history. As the nation integrated itself politically, economically, and culturally the parts fit more securely into the whole, but the parts still remained as distinct and self-conscious entities.

and “a sense of common belonging.”¹⁶ Research in this field is well advanced.¹⁷

State historical societies have long valued the kind of broad-based cultural history that is customarily known as regionalism, although it is usually pursued under the familiar label of state and local history. Regional themes are implicit in their founding missions, institutional histories, and specialized collections. Historical societies keep faith with founding missions and established practices dating back to the local history movement of the nineteenth century. It was then that local history in the United States emerged as a distinct intellectual tradition and genre of historical writing, and that historical societies became the first purveyors of public history. Through the maintenance of archives, libraries, museums, and historic sites, state historical societies (and several urban ones too) have gathered systematic collections of manuscripts, documents, rare books, and artifacts that have greatly enriched our understanding of the American past. Preservation activities at these agencies save

¹⁶Louis Wirth, “The Limitations of Regionalism” in *Regionalism in America*, ed. Merrill Jensen (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), 381-93, esp. 392, where Wirth has appropriately cautioned that “The regionalism as a dogma can easily degenerate into a cult.” On the concept of perceptual geography and “perception studies,” see Michael Steiner and Clarence Mondale, *Region and Regionalism in the United States: A Sourcebook for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1988), 256-64.

¹⁷A considerable part of American history focuses upon specific regions and regional themes, and the nature of regionalism has been a topic of special interest and sustained debate among historians, geographers, political scientists, and students of American literature. See Edward L. Ayers and others, *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in American, 1920-1945* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1992); Barbara Allen and Thomas J. Schlereth, eds., *Sense of Place: American Regional Cultures* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990); Michael Steiner and Clarence Mondale, *Region and Regionalism in the United States: A Sourcebook for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1988); Ira Sharkansky, *Regionalism in American Politics* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1970); Richard E. Engler, Jr., *The Challenge of Diversity* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964); Merrill Jensen, *Regionalism in America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951); and Howard W. Odum and Harry Estill Moore, *American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1938).

architecturally and historically significant buildings and entire neighborhoods, while their scholarly journals and popular magazines serve historians and public audiences alike. Historical societies may take pardonable pride in their long tradition of public service, scholarship, and profound sense of purpose.¹⁸

While local history has long been the meat and drink of historical societies, the view from the academy has been somewhat more ambivalent. Academic historians who research and write local history sometimes seem defensive about its purposes and claims to attention. In some instances, they even abandoned the conventional state and local history labels in preference for the presumably more comprehensive and useful shibboleths of regional studies, community studies, urban history, ethnic studies, case-studies of national history, “nearby” history, or even the all encompassing “public history.” But it may be said that state and local history needs no repackaging, embellishment, or apologies. The themes, topics, concepts, methods, and sources of state and local history are broad enough to include all catchwords and angles of vision, as is manifestly apparent from the richness of the existing literature. As Myron Marty has observed, “local history done under other rubrics ... is still local history.”¹⁹ Nonetheless, the “community study” model has

¹⁸See, for instance, the manifesto of Edward P. Alexander, James C. Olson, and Frederick L. Rath, Jr., “State Historical Societies: A Different View,” *OAH Newsletter* (Nov. 1990): 16. On the research interests and programs of historical societies and museums, see Gary B. Nash, “Behind the Velvet Curtain: Academic History, Historical Societies, and the Presentation of the Past,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* CXIV (Jan. 1990): 3-35; Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Jo Blatti, *Past Meets Present: Essays About Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987); Gerald George, “Learning from Lester: Some Reflections on Historical Societies,” *The Public Historian* 7 (Fall 1985): 65-70; Harvey Green, “The Role of Research in Public Historical Agencies,” *The Public Historian* 5 (Fall 1983): 71-6; Walter Muir Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies: An Inquiry Into Their Research and Publication Functions and Their Financial Future* (Boston: The Boston Athenaeum, Distributed by Harvard University Press, 1962); Julian P. Boyd, “State and Local Historical Societies in the United States,” *The American Historical Review* XL (Oct. 1934-July 1935): 10-37.

¹⁹Myron A. Marty, “The Place of Local History in the Training of Public Historians,” *The Public Historian* 5 (Fall 1983): 77-8.

produced the most detailed and deeply textured accounts of American localities. Its claims to attention are considerable.

Community studies as a type of local history has been a particularly fruitful ground. Historical studies of this mold have great affinity with the kind of “thick description” of local life and attention to detail that was a hallmark of the cultural history written by Clifford Geertz.²⁰ This broad-based cultural history is sometimes referred to as the “community-social interaction model.” This model falls well outside the familiar narrative mode of history. It is less concerned with tracing the local course of national events and more with getting at the kinds of formal and informal networks that define individuals, groups, and entire communities on their own terms. It examines the processes of community building that have historically defined a given locality, such as social mobility, immigration, urbanization, industrialization, and interactions between these various long-term processes. History as process gives context to the daily rhythms of work, leisure, and family that punctuate individual lives. Events, both local and distant, impact individual lives too, but social and cultural historians look primarily at the deep structure of communities. They seek to identify hierarchical relationships within a community, as manifested in the distribution of power and goods and in the educational, religious, ethnic, demographic, and political identification of its residents. Within this conception of locality, research can still examine the unique or not so unique ways that specific communities have responded to outside forces at work in American society at large.²¹

These, then, are some of the key ideas, fundamental themes, and interdisciplinary approaches involved in the study of localities. Localized historical studies are informed by the tools and concepts of historians, historical geographers, and anthropologists, and embrace not only documentary evidence but also the material past. Whether one conceives local history as

²⁰See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

²¹Mark Friedberger and Janice H. Webster, “Social Structure and State and Local History,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 9 (July 1978): 297-8. The authors argue that the “social structure” model should form the basis of studying state and local history.

localized case studies of national history, regional studies, or community studies, it is a broad and rich field of historical inquiry with many practitioners inside and outside the academy. These developments might lead to what Kathleen Neils Conzen has called “the basis for a true local history of the United States—a local history resting on coherent interpretation of the changing nature of life at the local level and the changing role of the local community in American development.”²² Such remains a desideratum, but the concepts, methods, and materials for such histories are clearly at hand. It is hoped that this discussion has brought the field of local history into clear view, along with its needs and opportunities.

²²Kathleen Neils Conzen, “Community Studies, Urban History, and American Local History” in *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, ed. Michael Kammen (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 270.