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LOCAL HISTORY AND THE
BICENTENNIAL YEAR IN MAINE
A REVIEW ESSAY

The United States Bicentennial year 1976 marked the high-water point of a flood of local historical works when eighty such titles were published on Maine communities. During the previous fifteen years nearly two hundred had been published, while in 1977 the number of Maine local historical publications fell to thirty.¹ Of these thirty, several were belated completions of projects begun the previous year.

If one unifying theme may be found in these historical works, it is the celebration of the local community and its way of life. This is not unexpected in light of Page Smith's thesis "that if we except the family and the church, the basic form of social organization experienced by the vast majority of Americans up to the early decades of the twentieth century was the small town."² Further, the reader is struck by the applicability of anthropologist Robert Redfield's description of an ideal small community to the towns of Maine. From his studies Redfield identified four qualities to be found to varying degrees in all small communities. These are distinctiveness, smallness, homogeneity, and all-providing self-sufficiency.³ It is these qualities that the compilers, editors, and authors of Maine-related books published in the bicentennial year had as the subject of their works. Although they agreed substantially on the importance of these topics, these same compilers, editors, and authors differed radically in their methods of presentation.

There were two principal kinds of historical works published on Maine communities in 1976. The first, and by far the larger group, was works which may be labeled

information about the local community compiled by local researchers. The second group properly may be labeled town histories. Those works in the larger group devoted to describing a town and dedicated to celebrating its past fit rather neatly into three categories: illustrated works; collections of essays on high points of local history; and collections of fact. The second group included those works meeting most or all of the generally accepted criteria for researching, writing, and publishing local history. These two groups are discussed in turn below.

The largest category of local works was the collection of illustrations, usually photographs and drawings. The books on York, New Gloucester, and Ogunquit offer three different approaches to the use of illustrations in preparing a local historical volume. In *York, Maine, Then and Now*, “The 1975 photographs were taken as nearly as possible from the exact stand point of the old ones.”⁴ The photographs in this book stand as silent testimony to the changes in the community over time. Captions are provided but there is no further commentary. The reader is left to his own imagination as to the causes for the changes portrayed. The photographs in *New Gloucester Images* are “not intended to portray an accurate cross-section of the town. Rather, they are ‘random images of New Gloucester,’ which when taken together express the timeless spirit of a New England town that has retained its essential character for over 200 years.”⁵ The book takes an impressionistic approach to this task and succeeds admirably in achieving its vision. *The Cove: Perkins Cove at Ogunquit, Maine*⁶ is a study of a small area in one Maine town. The book illustrates, in a powerful mix of photographs and commentary, the changing relationships between the existing fishermen’s society and the growing artist colony.

Two works which are transitional pieces between the illustrated historical works above and the works which are collections of essays on “high-spot” topics of local interest below are *A Backward Glance: A Selection of Photographs of Bath in the 1890's*⁷ and *Tall Ships, White Houses, and Elms: Thomaston, Maine, 1870-1900*.⁸ These two works are primarily photographs illustrating periods of prosperity in each community. These works are photographic celebrations of past good times in their local communities.

The second well-defined category of bicentennial publications was the collection of essays on subjects of some enduring interest or entertaining value. These books usually centered on settlement, prominent names and families, agriculture and industry, churches, clubs, schools, and buildings of some local or regional reputation. A successful blend of short studies in this format is *Bicentennial 1776 USA 1976 Dover-Foxcroft, Maine*.⁹ This book is an attractive informative mixture of illustrations and brief historical sketches on some two hundred subjects from the town's past. The *Bangor Daily News* sponsored a similar volume with the publication of *A Bicentennial Look at Bygone Bangor*.¹⁰ The number of essays, labeled stories, is limited to thirteen, and as expected, the coverage of each subject is much more extensive than in the Dover-Foxcroft collection. The quality of the essays is outstanding, not surprising in view of the fact that the contributors have had much experience with historical writing.

Collections of facts about local history contained the widest variation in format and documentation of any of the types examined. These books ranged on a continuum from *A History of Frenchboro, Long Island Plantation, Hancock County, Maine*¹¹ which contains a minimum of citations to *A Bicentennial History of Hiram, Maine, 1776-1976*¹² which meticulously documents every statement of fact with

references to earlier works. It is left to the local authority to judge the relative merits of the research found in works of this type.

The balance of the books containing information about Maine communities was a mixed bag. Reprints of earlier local histories were published in Deer Isle¹³ and Dexter.¹⁴ In Brunswick¹⁵ a facsimile of a nineteenth-century diary was printed, and in Brooksville¹⁶ a book containing genealogical information about the area residents at the time of the Revolution was published. One delightful volume in a class by itself is *200 Years of Lubec History, 1776-1976*.¹⁷ This visually exciting potpourri of local information is a reader's delight as it mixes photographs, drawings, reminiscences, and excerpts from printed sources in its recounting of highlights from the town's past.

None of the titles discussed above may be looked upon as a true town history. Although filled with the information needed to write a town history, they cannot be labeled town histories. With the exception of the Bangor title mentioned above, the books are the product of local history enthusiasts writing for local audiences. Research has generally been confined to examination of existing publications and few references to manuscript material are to be found.¹⁸

In any town history certain themes must be developed and highlighted. None is more important than the central question of the origin and growth (or decline) of the community and the way certain political and economic questions are answered through the years.¹⁹ Further, the social, cultural, and intellectual life of the community should be examined for a more complete understanding of the way people live together in their environment.²⁰ Finally, aids such as proper documentation and indexes should be present to simplify access to the information on these topics.

Of the small group of titles that might properly be labeled town histories, three are fine examples of what may be done with Maine communities. Two, the books on Lewiston²¹ and Sears Island,²² were the works of professional historians, while the third, on Cumberland,²³ was compiled and edited by a local librarian with a lifetime interest in her town's history. These books may be reviewed by the more rigorous standards outlined above as their purposes and audiences are different from those works solely devoted to celebrating a town's past.

Cumberland, Maine, in Four Centuries may be viewed as an intermediate work bridging the gap between the volumes published by the local historians and those of the professional historians. In this book the reader finds extensive narratives on all aspects of the topics of settlement, growth, and social life, but the format is more a series of long essays than the single integrated treatment found in the books on Searsport and Lewiston. This is not unexpected in a book with several contributors.

Historic Lewiston: A Textile City in Transition has its primary focus on the industrial and economic life of the city. The book recounts the economic history of the city from its early agricultural days, through the rise and fall of its single-industry textile period, into its contemporary position as a diversified industrial city. The book is an excellent companion volume to *Historic Lewiston: Franco-American Origins*²⁴ which examines the social, cultural, and intellectual life of the city's dominant ethnic group.

A History of Sears Island, Searsport, Maine, traces the exploitation of the economic resources of the island and its surrounding region. The island has been in turn an outpost for taking fish and wood, an agricultural center, and a resort area. The wealth of detail underlying the analysis of the causes of the changes in economic activity

and the ways by which different proprietors gained control over the island make this book lively reading.

After reading through the books mentioned above, and examining dozens more, one overwhelming observation may be made – that the individual works appear to have been produced in isolation. Only the barest references to surrounding communities and areas are to be found while even fewer are made to the New England region. Only war, major maritime centers excepted, brings mention of the United States. This need not be surprising in view of the underlying reasons for the publication of the Bicentennial books, the celebration of a way of life viewed as distinct, small, homogeneous, and self-sufficient. Given these perceptions it is not difficult to understand why these historical works are filled with “pride of place.”²⁵ These volumes celebrate the years in American history when the locus of power and influence was the town. In this way these books are in the mainstream of contemporary historical research. They are some of the necessary building blocks for “the creation of a general version of American history opening with the town as the center of attention, moving on to consider the growing importance of cities, states, and regions, and ending with the piecemeal ‘nationalization’ of American life, a process still going on.”²⁶ No historian attempting to synthesize a state or regional history can afford to disregard local works like those published during the Bicentennial year.

— NOTES —

¹ Eric S. Flower, “Maine Local Histories, 1960-1975,” *Maine History News* 12 (January 1977): 14-15; 12 (April 1977): 15; 12 (July 1977): 15 and “Maine Local Histories, 1976,” *Maine History News* 12 (October

1977): 15; 13 (January 1978): 15. Also "Maine Local Histories, 1977," *Maine History News* 13 (July 1978): 15.

² Page Smith, *As a City Upon a Hill: The Town in American History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p.vii.

³ Robert Redfield, *The Little Community: Viewpoints for the Study of a Human Whole* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p.4. A brief summary of Redfield's work and an assessment of its importance in the study of local history may be found in David J. Russo, *Families and Communities: A New View of American History* (Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1974), pp. 12, 28.

⁴ *York, Maine, Then and Now: A Pictorial Documentation* (York: The Old Gaol Museum Committee and The Old York Historical and Improvement Society, 1976), p.v.

⁵ *New Gloucester Images* (New Gloucester: The Bicentennial Committee, 1976), p.4.

⁶ Carrie Boyd, *The Cove: Perkins Cove at Ogunquit, Maine* (Lewiston: Pen-Mor Printers, Inc., 1976).

⁷ Charles E. Hewitt, *A Backward Glance: A Selection of Photographs of Bath in the 1890's* (Brunswick Publishing Co., 1976).

⁸ *Tall Ships, White Houses, and Elms: Thomaston, Maine, 1870-1900* (Rockland: Courier-Gazette, Inc., 1976).

⁹ *Bicentennial 1776 USA 1976 Dover-Foxcroft, Maine* (Rockland: Courier-Gazette Inc., 1976).

¹⁰ *A Bicentennial Look at Bygone Bangor* (Bangor: Bangor Publishing Co., 1976).

¹¹ Vivian Lunt, *A History of Frenchboro, Long Island Plantation, Hancock County, Maine* (N.p., 1976).

¹² *A Bicentennial History of Hiram, Maine, 1776-1976* (N.p., 1976).

¹³ George L. Hosmer, *An Historical Sketch of the Town of Deer Isle, Maine* (Boston: The Fort Hill Press, 1905; reprinted Rockland: Courier-Gazette, Inc., 1976).

¹⁴ Stanley Plummer, *History of Dexter, Maine, 1801-1901* (N.p., 1942; reprinted Dexter: Dexter Historical Society, 1976).

¹⁵ John Furbish, *Facts About Brunswick, Maine* (Brunswick: Pejepscot Historical Society, 1976).

¹⁶ Walter A. Snow, *Brooksville, Maine: A Town in the Revolution* (Ellsworth: Downeast Graphics, 1976).

¹⁷ Ryerson Johnson, ed., *200 Years of Lubec History, 1776-1976* (Lubec: Lubec Historical Society, 1976).

¹⁸ Thomas E. Felt, *Researching, Writing, and Publishing Local History* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1976). This guide should aid local historians in preparing their works for publication. It is an extensive "how-to" treatment of all phases of local history.

¹⁹ W. G. Hoskins *Local History in England* (Totowa, N. J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1972), pp.14-15.

²⁰ Russo, *Families and Communities*, p.12 (See note 3 above).

²¹ James S. Leamon, *Historic Lewiston: A Textile City in Transition* (Auburn: Produced for the Lewiston Historical Commission by the students in the Graphic Arts Department, Central Maine Vocational Technical Institute, 1976). Reviewed by Madeline D. Giguere, *Maine Historical Society Quarterly* 16 (Winter 1977): 161-164.

²² Joel W. Eastman, *A History of Sears Island, Searsport, Maine* (Searsport: Searsport Historical Society, 1976).

²³ Phyllis S. Sweetser, comp., *Cumberland, Maine, in Four Centuries* (Cumberland: The Town of Cumberland, 1976). Reviewed by Benjamin Butler, *Maine Historical Society Quarterly* 17 (Winter 1978): 167-169.

²⁴ *Historic Lewiston: Franco-American Origins* (Auburn: Printed for the Lewiston Historical Commission at the Central Maine Vocational Technical Institute, 1974).

²⁵ James C. Olson, "The Role of Local History," (Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1965, reprinted 1977), p.6. The phrase "pride of place" is from Olson's presidential address delivered at the twenty-fourth annual meeting of AASLH, October 29, 1964. In three words he defines much of the driving force behind local history.

²⁶ Russo, *Families and Communities*, p.2.

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