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## Guest Opinion: Preserving Local History

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## Preserving Local History

by Patricia J. Fanning

Fred Holland Day died in obscurity at his home in Norwood, Massachusetts on November 2, 1933, leaving behind in total disarray hundreds of scrapbooks, photographs, documents and letters, all to be donated to the Norwood Historical Society. The Society, in turn, needing a building to house this collection along with their other materials, purchased Day's mansion and made it their headquarters. It was not until decades later, however, that the Society discovered the value and importance of the manuscripts and memorabilia they possessed.

At the turn of the century, Fred Holland Day had risen to a position of international fame, distinction, and notoriety as a publisher, photographer, and bibliophile. Under his direction, the publishing firm of Copeland & Day was renowned for beautifully illustrated and finely printed volumes. Day became one of the premiere artistic photographers in America, his moody, almost medieval photos haunting in their beauty and grace; and he amassed one of the largest collections of Keatsiana in the world.

Eventually, however, a combination of illness, eccentricity, and disillusionment led Day into seclusion. He remained in his Norwood home for the last fifteen years of his life, rarely leaving his bedroom and receiving few visitors. With this withdrawal, his name slipped into the shadows, and, by the time of his death, few remembered his name or his distinctive artistic contribution to the aesthetic nineties. In short, he was considered by most in the town to be a mentally unbalanced hermit. Today, after massive organization and constant, if selective, promotion by the Society, the main portion of Day's papers are accessible to researchers. Scholars interested in topics as wide-ranging as photography, book illustration, and architecture as well as those studying people as diverse as Louise Imogen Guiney, Louis Rhead, and Ralph Adams Cram, find the Society a necessary stop.

The Archives of American Art, a division of the Smithsonian Institution, has microfilmed a large segment of the collection to increase its availability to scholars across the country,



*F. Holland Day, by Frederick Evans  
(Reprinted through the courtesy of the Norwood Historical Society.)*

and a full-length biography of Day has been written. In addition, the Norwood Historical Society has loaned its support and portions of its collection to important exhibitions at Harvard University, the International Museum of Photography in Rochester, New York and the Museum of Photographic Art in San Diego, California.

Without the efforts of numerous volunteers throughout the years and the dedication of a Society which has supported itself on meager resources for decades, this collection would undoubtedly have been lost forever. As it stands today, however, a major portion of our shared artistic heritage has been preserved for future generations — and all because a group of dedicated townspeople were interested enough in the

history of their community and its citizens to preserve, examine, organize, and promote the donated works of one eccentric, reclusive old man.

Too often local history is looked upon as the domain of amateurs, eccentric old women and men waxing enthusiastic about the "good old days" bearing no relation to reality and having no relevance to today's society. These people are viewed as anachronisms, keepers of dust-covered, nondescript objects and yellowing, unidentifiable photographs, clinging to an often imaginary glorified past, honoring the lifestyles of their ancestors (primarily white Anglo-Saxon Protestants) to the exclusion of spheres of influence such as immigration, industrialization and working class life. At their worst, local

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history and historical societies can come chillingly close to that picture.

At their best, however, they can provide important pieces to the mosaic that is our shared past. David Kyvig and Myron Marty in their book, *Nearby History* explain the essential significance of local history:

The nation's history, it is now apparent, cannot fully be understood by looking only at leadership elites and their decisions. The experience of other social groups, particularly anonymous people who form the mass of society, needs to be examined. Slavery cannot be understood by investigating only Abraham Lincoln; one must find out what it meant to the slave. The Great Depression of the 1930s cannot be comprehended by analyzing only Franklin D. Roosevelt; one must consider how the families of unemployed workers lived through it. The Vietnam War cannot be appreciated by viewing it only from the perspective of Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon; one must learn what soldiers, draft evaders and civilians on the home front thought about it.

This new insight has fostered a resurgence in local history, bringing with it high standards of accuracy and professional acceptance. A steady stream of books based on diaries, memorabilia and reminiscences have surfaced and the growing popularity of local history in both the school and college curriculum is indicative of an emerging interest in community history in general.

But there is a danger that the pendulum will swing too far in the opposite direction. Professionalism and higher education notwithstanding, the "elder statesmen" of local history as well as ardent amateurs have a considerable contribution to make and should not be ignored. Unfortunately, the local historian's chief associative advocate, the American Association for State and Local History, has bowed to the so-called "academics."

AASLH gears itself to that contingent of societies with money and prestige. Professional assistance, seminars,

books, and video materials are costly and, despite protest to the contrary, grants to underwrite local history research are awarded primarily to those scholars affiliated with universities and well-endowed associations. All of this disregards the vast majority of societies, operating on shoestring budgets and staffed by volunteers. Local history, it seems, is becoming susceptible to a new elitism, one which could prove every bit as deadly as the filiopietism of past generations.

The point of all this is to call for a little discretion and perhaps a little common sense. No, local history should not be left solely in the hands of a few short-sighted amateurs, but neither should it be handed over lock, stock, and barrel to the academics. After all, if you recall, it was the professional historian and educator who squeezed the life's blood out of our nation's history. Men of true heroism such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln have become caricatures while the turbulent, dramatic crises of the American Revolution, the Civil War and the Depression are presented as homogenized, one-dimensional issues to our schoolchildren.

There is an opportunity here to create a new, more vibrant and relevant historical perspective, capitalizing on the natural curiosities and interests of the people. Utilizing the proper research skills, countless social, economic and political processes can be examined in microscopic fashion and can be presented with an eye and ear towards uncovering the vitality of their problems and the energy of their ideas. Local and amateur historians are vital

to the achievement of such a goal. They know how to obtain data on families, town government, industrial development and local prejudices and predilections, even if their interpretive skills are, at times, lacking. They understand their own communities and are themselves the products of community history at work. Professional educators and scholars should tap into the vast resources of enthusiasm, knowledge and source material these local historians and their organizations can offer.

In New York state, school systems are required to begin teaching local history to all students in the fourth grade. Children are exposed early to the excitement of discovery. They learn that "history" is not something that happened somewhere else; they are taught the significance of land features in the growth of a community, architectural styles as symbols of economic standing, the ramifications of immigration patterns and the effects of the railroad on sleepy farming communities.

Surely Massachusetts, a state so proud of its heritage, should not be left behind in this regard. To be sure, there are communities within the state that have assembled strong local history programs, but these are isolated instances. The plethora of both professional history educators and local historians ensures that, with a little imagination, creativity and cooperation, Massachusetts could take the lead in local history offerings. There are other Fred Holland Days out there; anonymous men and women waiting to be discovered and given their rightful place in the social, artistic, and industrial heritage of our communities. Each recovery from the oblivion of the past is a tremendous victory of the future. □

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