Local History: Some Guidelines for Beginning a Research Project

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Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and R. G. Collingwood, who probably would agree on nothing else, would agree on the importance of asking the right questions when beginning an investigation. Whether in solving mysteries or in writing history, the sources needed, the use made of them, and the nature and success of the results depend upon the questions asked. Local history is no exception. Basically, local histories fall into two categories. One is an accumulation of facts or chronicle of events and, if accurately and carefully done, should be valued, not despised. Encyclopedias are full of examples of this type of useful work. The aim of a higher form of history, however, leads beyond mere narrative into the realm of analysis. This analytical history not only tells what happened, but how and why it occurred. What factors converged at this particular place and point in time to produce a given result? Correspondingly, the best local historians, amateurs and professionals, approach their materials with probing questions and seek to find not only what happened, but why it happened as it did.

In no other area of historical studies is the range of sophistication among researchers likely to be so great as in the area of local history. This field,
often thought of as the domain of the amateur and certainly one in which his interest is ancient and continuing, has seen the production of innumerable local studies done by persons without advanced training in historical methods. Some of these have been excellent. For example, *The History of Newberry County, South Carolina, 1749-1860*, written by Thomas H. Pope, a Newberry County lawyer, and published in 1973 by the University of South Carolina Press, received a very favorable discussion in the *American Historical Review*. In spite of the tradition of amateurs working in local history, professional historians have not distained the field. While many trained historians have concentrated on national or regional events and movements, others have always been interested in the past of particular localities. Students and followers of Frederick Jackson Turner have produced numerous studies of the beginnings of American communities, exemplified by Merle Curti's classic work, *The Making of an American Community*.

The increase in interest in local history on the part of the historical profession has been phenomenal since the Second World War. With the development of urban history as a popular field and the growing interest in social and demographic history, many professionals and students have turned their attention to the study of the nation's cities, towns, and even families. Recent studies on New England townships and families by John Demos, Philip Greven, and Kenneth Lockridge are indicative of the type of work being done throughout the country; and many theses, dissertations, and articles have been written about aspects of Atlanta's history. David J. Russo, in a book published in 1974 by the American Association for State and Local History, *Families and Communities*, goes so far as to advocate abandoning the national-political chronology as a framework within which to study American history. He suggests an orientation which emphasizes the local community as the major source of impact upon the lives of Americans, yielding to the national community only in this century.

In short, today both amateurs and professionals are interested in local history and each has a significant contribution to make. In addition to writing some excellent histories, amateur historians have done great service by publishing and preserving local traditions and documents and by compiling information that might
have otherwise been lost. Frequently, amateurs have been familiar not only with the oral traditions, artifacts, and topography of the area in which they work, but also they have had an intimate knowledge of the local records. The professional historian has brought to the study of local history a knowledge of historical methods, of research techniques, and of comparative history. Each type of practitioner, the professional historian and the amateur, can be of help to the other; each can learn from the other; and the extent to which each does so will enrich his own historical productions.

What kinds of questions will the local historian be asking? These will be determined not only by his historical sophistication but also by the nature and limitations of his topic. To study all aspects of the entire history of any community would be an incredible feat for one person. Donald Dean Parker, in his *Local History: How to Gather It, Write It, and Publish It*, suggests the broad range of questions with which the various researchers in local history will be dealing. He includes "A Model Outline for a Local History" which encompasses almost any conceivable aspect of community life with which an historian might wish to deal: geography and topography, antiquities and Indians, pioneer settlement, economic developments, political developments, religious development, population history, the family, education, newspapers, publications and libraries, social and fraternal organizations, cultural activities and the Arts, science and technology, law, social problems and reform, recreation, and folklore. Each topic is further divided and subdivided. Under pioneer settlement, for instance, his research examines the following factors influencing the pattern of life:

1. Conditions which made the area desirable as a home
   a. Indians--absent or still present when settlement began
   b. Land--wooded or prairie
   c. Transportation--difficult or relatively easy
   d. Sources of income--immediate or to be developed
   e. Markets--nearby or far away
2. Character and composition of the early settlers
   a. Nationality by birth and parentage--native American or immigrants
   b. Home of settlers immediately preceding their coming . . .
In treating this topic, Parker suggests including biographical sketches of the outstanding pioneers, not only those of the founders but also those of their chief supporters and advisers. He also advocates the use of maps showing the area at intervals after settlement with explanations of details and matters not readily apparent. Each topic in Parker's outline is broken down in this way, and his detail could be of considerable help to the beginning writer of local history.

The local historian who would attempt the entire range of topics outlined by Parker must expect to live a long time. Most historians, even those who do general or survey histories of a town, county, or other locality, limit the topics which they cover. For instance, George Rogers, in his able and interesting History of Georgetown County, South Carolina, begins with the geographical setting, proceeds to the Indians, then tells of the early settlers, from whence they came and how they lived. Using the founders as a bridge, he describes the birth of Georgetown itself and the development of that distinct culture that characterizes the South Carolina low country. The leaders of the county and the role they played in the advent and events of the Revolution are treated next, and Rogers continues his narrative in the same pattern up until the present day. Generally, however, he confines his discussion to the economic and political history of the county and to the social and cultural history of the county's elites.

More common than the general history is the local history which is limited to one institution such as a business, church, or school, or to one topic, possibly an analysis of slavery as it operated in a particular county, or an examination of social or economic mobility in a community. Other local histories will consider only specific periods. A notable professional historian who specializes in local history is William McKee Evans whose study of the Reconstruction period in the lower Cape Fear region of North Carolina, Ballots and Fence Rails, won the American Association for State and Local History's Manuscript Award in 1966. Evans carefully examines the political, economic, and social adjustments of the people of this small area during the very critical twelve years, 1865-1877.

When the topic has been well defined, the background reading has been done, and the basic questions
to be considered are well in mind, then is the time to begin matching these questions with sources. Determining the sources needed requires a good reference method whether one is doing the research oneself or, in the role of archivist or librarian, assisting another to find the materials that he needs. What type of records would likely contain the information needed? What person, or agency, in the normal course of daily activities, would have created such a body of records? In many cases the answer is so obvious that one may scarcely be aware of having asked the question.

Perhaps one wants to study the diffusion of agricultural technology in a county. He would begin by asking what farm implements were in use on ordinary farms during a given period. The Probate Records include inventories of estates with lists and values of all farm implements belonging to a sizable sampling of those persons who died during the period. Newspapers with their advertisements of farm machinery, census returns which report the value of machinery on a given farm at ten-year intervals, account books of stores which sold farm machinery, or the records of individual farmers are all excellent sources of information.

Church minutes and other church records come immediately to mind as key resources for histories of a community's early religious life. The minutes sometimes tell more about the social mores of the congregation than about their theology, but they may yield fascinating tidbits of insight to the careful reader. Robert C. Lawrence, in The State of Robeson, describes the minute books of Asbury Church in the Raynham section of Robeson County, North Carolina, in the mid-nineteenth century:

Here a line is drawn through the name of an erstwhile member, and opposite it is written: "Turned out. No good nohow." Another: "Gone to the Baptists. Never was no force." Another: "She fell from grace." Another: "Deep water." This stumped me for a time, [Lawrence writes,] but as the Baptists immerse and the Methodists sprinkle, I concluded that the clerk knew the Baptists had got his member, but was too proud to admit it! Another: "Expelled. Good riddance." Another: "Gone to the Baptists OR WORSE." This held me for a
time, but I reached the conclusion that the words "or worse" was simply a sly dig of the clerk at the Presbyterians!

And the pages bearing the names of the slave members of the congregation are marked across, and on the margin is written the annotation: "All gone to old Abe Lincoln." 5

Other sources helpful on the early religious life might be the memoirs of early ministers, or the papers of prominent church members. One could go far toward writing a history of the Episcopal Church in Americus, Georgia, just on information found in the papers of the Harrold Family which are in the Emory University Library. In some cases, the local newspaper may reflect a strong religious orientation.

Researchers interested in the pattern of land ownership or in who settled where and when should consult the state land plats and grants and local county deed books. The deeds not only tell who bought and sold a given tract of land, they often identify it as "Including the plantation on which so-and-so lives" with so-and-so being the grantee, the grantor, or a third person. The plantation may be barely large enough for a cabin and a corn field, but at least one determines where so-and-so had his cabin and corn field. Migration patterns are sometimes quite evident in the recorded deeds. For instance, little is known about the Quakers who lived in Marlboro County, South Carolina, in the early national period; but their departure from the county in the beginning of the 1830's is vividly depicted in their land sales, culminating in the sale of their meeting house to the Methodists in 1833. The waves of migration from this area to the Old Southwest are just as evident.

Robert W. Ramsey, in Carolina Cradle; Settlement of the Northwest Carolina Frontier, 1747-1762, studied with great care the settlement process in Rowan County, North Carolina, between the Yadkin and Catawba Rivers. He considered such questions as the identity, origin and location of the original settlers, the economic and religious motivations influencing the settlement process, the character of the settlers, and the organization of the frontier community. To answer these questions, he used letters, diaries, tax lists,
genealogies, license records, probate records, court
dockets and cases, land warrants and surveys, account
books, church records, deed books, orphans docket,
judgments, census records, marriage records, newspapers
and various published colonial and state records both in
North Carolina and in the counties and states from which
the settlers came.  

How does one find the records one needs? The
most efficient place to begin is with a good guide to
the literature, and Thomas E. Felt's new and well-
written handbook, Researching, Writing, and Publishing
Local History, provides a valuable introduction for the
beginning historian. Because his book is small, only
165 pages devoted in almost equal parts to the task his
title describes, he mentions but few specific finding
aids. Rather, he focuses on the general characteristics
and usefulness of the sources he discusses: newspapers,
interviews, personal manuscripts, pictures, maps, orga-
nizational records, and artifacts. He associates each
body of material with the locations where it is likely
to be found, such as libraries, archives, private collec-
tions, and public offices. In the case of archaeologi-
cal evidence and artifacts, these may abound literally
underfoot and require only an increased and informed
awareness of one's surroundings to bring them to light.
Early in the planning stages of a project, Felt counsels
the researcher to visit a good reference collection in a
library equipped with the standard bibliographies and
indexes. At the same time, Felt warns the researcher of
inconsistencies and problems which may be encountered as
he begins to use libraries other than the one with which
he is most familiar. Felt emphasizes the importance of
proper evaluation of evidence, of understanding the
strengths and weaknesses of source materials, and of
careful note-taking. In short, he stresses high quality
research. Potentially as useful during the later stages
of a local history project are his discussions of writ-
ing techniques and descriptions of the practical aspects
of publishing.  

The number of history-related bibliographies
has greatly increased in recent years, but certain ones
remain basic tools for identifying the published ma-
terial on any topic in American history. One of the
foremost of these is the Harvard Guide to American His-
tory. Covering all periods and a great variety of
topics, this guide lists reference sources and standard works including state historical publications as well as state and local histories.8 Writings in American History, the major annual bibliography in the field, provided comprehensive coverage of books and articles until it ceased publication with the volume for 1960.9 For more recent material one should consult James J. Dougherty's four volume compilation, Writings on American History, 1962-73; A Subject Bibliography of Articles,10 and the annual volumes with the same name issued, since 1974, by the American Historical Association. Unlike the old Writings, these new volumes list only journal articles. The most comprehensive, current, subject bibliography of books, pamphlets, maps, and atlases is the Library of Congress's "Subject Catalog."11 Complementing these publications is the quarterly, America: History and Life, which provides increasingly wide coverage of the journal literature and which, since 1974, has included books and dissertations as well.12 Major journals often publish annual, serial bibliographies in their respective areas. A good example is "Southern History in Periodicals; A Selected Bibliography," which appears regularly in the Journal of Southern History and lists under broad subject headings many scholarly articles published during each year of publication. Also of great usefulness are the many lesser bibliographies, limited in their coverage to specific topics, time periods, geographic areas, or types of material. These may be identified through any of the above publications, particularly the Harvard Guide.

The ease of locating publications, manuscripts, and other records may vary with the type of material. Union catalogs, data bases, and the published catalogs of major libraries, all available in most large reference collections, greatly simplify the search for needed books, journals, newspapers, and other printed matter. The task of tracking down manuscripts is considerably more difficult. Philip M. Hamer's Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States, currently under revision, summarizes the major groups of papers in about 1,300 manuscript and archival depositories in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Canal Zone.13 The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections briefly describes the several thousand collections reported to it annually,14 and many manuscript depositories have published excellent, though sometimes hard to obtain,
guides to their own collections. Despite these efforts, large numbers of manuscript collections go unreported. For government records, the adequacy of finding aids varies from state to state. The North Carolina State Archives has published summary guides to its state agency records, county records, and private manuscript collections. The South Carolina Archives, in 1976, issued a new edition of its summary guide to state, colonial, and many local governmental records. The Georgia Archives, though lacking a comprehensive listing of its holdings, nonetheless has issued a number of very helpful guides and inventories to individual series and collections. In 1974, the National Archives, which houses many collections vital for local history topics, published a new edition of its comprehensive guide and a catalog of its microfilm publications.

A vast number of private papers and public records have not found their way into depositories and frequently require a full measure of detective work. The key to locating public records, whether municipal, county, state, or federal, lies in determining what office or agency would have created the type of record needed. This is frequently obvious. A researcher interested in the county schools might check the offices of the county Board of Education or the Superintendent. A good history of education in the state, if such exists, will probably explain the legal provisions for schools through the years and thus suggest other, earlier bodies of records. Published annual reports and other documents of the State Department of Education and its predecessors should tell something of what was done by whom during a particular period. On occasion, the Statutes and old law codes can be of much help. Some counties were fortunate enough to have had their records inventoried by the Historical Records Survey during the 1930's. These research inventories are invaluable for they include not only a description of the records in each office, but an administrative history and a description of its functions as well. Local officials in charge of public records will in many cases prove to be most cooperative and helpful to researchers, but they are usually busy people, frequently short of space and, in many cases, they know nothing of the records created prior to their own tenure in office. Public records and especially private papers and organizational records can sometimes be traced by contacting descendants of
the persons involved. They may even turn up in junk shops or in unused parts of old buildings formerly owned or occupied by the individual or organization under study. Occasionally, a researcher may trace a potentially valuable group of papers from hand to hand only to find that they had been destroyed, usually a short time before his inquiry was received.

Whatever the problems of matching questions and sources, the difficulties and disappointments of locating materials, the research and writing of local history can be a challenging and satisfying activity, leading one into many interesting and unexpected avenues. Studying the past of a locality increases the researcher's perceptions of the area, the people, and of how and why things came to be the way they are. New topics for investigation are almost inexhaustible; and the possible questions and the sources that can be used in their exploration are limited only by the energy, imagination, and skill of the researcher.

NOTES


2Donald Dean Parker, Local History: How to Gather It, Write It, and Publish It (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1944), pp. 105-23.

3George Rogers, History of Georgetown County, South Carolina (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970).


12 America: History and Life, vol. 1- (July 1964-).
