



“Bloom Where You Are Planted”: Doing Local History in a Big World

To place Vermont history in a national context is to raise the fundamental question: Why do we teach Vermont history? What work do we want it to do for ourselves, our students, and our communities?

By DONA BROWN

Placing Vermont’s history in a national context is something teachers do nearly every day. In one sense it is a self-evident and even automatic response: We demonstrate to our students that Vermont’s history illustrates national trends, for example, or that Vermonters experienced the same waves of social change endured by those in the rest of the United States. In another sense, though, to place Vermont history in a national context is to raise the fundamental question: Why do we teach Vermont history? What work do we want it to do for ourselves, our students, and our communities?

The practice of local, state, and regional history itself has a long history, and over the years it has carried many burdens for historians and for their communities. Perhaps most important, the practice of local history has always raised two difficult historical questions: the relationship of local history to a sense of place—to regional or local identity; and the question of its social purposes.

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Local history was born with a sense of social purpose. The early historical societies and organizations came to life in the late nineteenth century, at a time of rapid and disruptive change in both rural and urban environments. Local history in those days took the form of town and state histories. It told tales of settlement: of Puritan and Yankee ancestors who bore the culture of Europe into the wilderness; of hardy pioneers eking out an independent living. These early local historians searched diligently for a usable past. At one extreme, they produced xenophobic and defensive works, reacting against the strange names and faces of late-nineteenth-century immigrants, and they often intended to shore up the authority of old settlers against new ones. But more generally, these early history writers hoped to use local history as a kind of community cement. For example, they hoped that a knowledge and appreciation of their heritage would help to keep young men and women from leaving the farm.

Local history was also born with a sense of regional identity. From its earliest days, local history emphasized the unique traits of the community or state. The perception of just what those unique traits were may have changed over time—indeed it did—but the idea that the local place was unique did not change. Vermont’s Green Mountain Boys have sometimes appeared as manly individualists, sometimes as Dorothy Canfield’s young heads of nuclear households (fundamentally suburban dads), sometimes as New Deal collectivists; but in each case they were seen as unique expressions of a distinctive past.

At some point in the mid-twentieth century, this emphasis on the unique character of a state or town tended to become rather defensive. Local historians came to feel that it was necessary to prove that their state or town or region had contributed something great to the world: “Vermonters fought at Ticonderoga,” or “Robert Frost lived here.” At the same time, most *writers* of local history in the first half of the twentieth century had to contend with the burden that they, too, along with their subjects, were somehow less serious or worthy than historians with a larger focus.

In the second half of the century, the practice of history underwent a great revisionist transformation. What was then called the “new social history” swept considerations of the local and small scale into the forefront of academic history. Historians gave new emphasis to the lives of ordinary people, and they typically concentrated on small-scale, long-term changes rather than on epoch-making events. For local history, that meant that the obscure and humble regions of the country might gain a new centrality. This generation of historians found itself liberated to work in small towns and rural hinterlands—now perceived as “case studies” of national change—without justifying their work in the

old defensive terms. In Vermont this new attitude wrought a revolution in history writing. Samuel Hand's close studies of local politics, along with his unapologetic emphasis on the local and small scale, heralded the change for a generation of historians. William Gilmore used five upper Connecticut River Valley towns to explore the history of literacy. Hal Barron used the town of Chelsea to write about the transformation of rural life. Randolph Roth used the lower Connecticut River valley towns, and Jeff Potash used Addison County, to explore the massive social and religious upheaval of the early nineteenth century.¹

For these historians, small-scale settings offered good opportunities for close study of otherwise unwieldy massive transformations: the rise and fall of literacy, of evangelicalism, or of the Republican Party. Breaking with the older tradition of local history, they did not usually grant state boundaries or regional identities any powerful mythic significance. As a group these historians generally worked to de-mystify regional myths and to weaken the association between local history and ancestor worship. Often, indeed, they were outsiders themselves, coming from other places or from ethnic groups who would have been excluded by earlier local historians.

Building on their foundation of close historical inquiry combined with healthy skepticism, our most recent model of local and regional historical inquiry has shifted back once again to a more active consideration of the *idea* of region. Local historians now investigate the "invented traditions" of region and place. They search for the boundaries of the "imagined community" that operates in states and regions. They ask, for example, where our images of Vermont originate, and who manufactured those images. In the work of Paul Searls, for example, the idea of the "Vermonters" is subjected to historical pressure; it changes in response to historical movements that shake the foundations of what we might once have imagined as a timeless community. Ironically, these scholars return full circle to some of the earliest historical works—to a sense of the uniqueness of region and place, to a sense that "Vermontness" is central to the story. But they place their work in a theoretical framework that integrates it into an international theoretical context.

Nancy Gallagher's groundbreaking study of the eugenics movement in Vermont fits that framework well, too.² From one standpoint, it analyzes an international debate about the nature of scientific knowledge and politics. But it also adds to the understanding of that debate by exploring the local circumstances, myths, and conflicts that generated a politically powerful and dangerous idea about "Yankee" community. Gallagher's work also returns to the concerns of the first generation of

local historians in another way: It addresses the Vermont community itself with a social and, in fact, a moral message. Her work is grounded in an immediate and powerful experience of class, power, and privilege in contemporary Vermont. Ultimately it is aimed not just at historians of science, but at the consciences of Vermonters today.

The pursuit of local history in Vermont today is at least partly rooted in new local concerns. Today many regional historians hope to use local history to create a “sense of place,” perhaps even a bioregional identity, that will encourage a deep sense of responsibility to and for the land and people of Vermont. One local and public historian, Tom Slayton, explores those connections in his commentaries on Vermont Public Radio. There Slayton explores the relationship between community historians and a larger sense of community identity in the pursuit of an essentially moral goal. One of Slayton’s commentaries remarked on Deborah Clifford’s biography of Abby Maria Hemenway. In one five-minute segment, he offered three layers of interpretation of Vermont’s past: Hemenway, the archetypal first-generation local historian, dedicated her life to preserving the memory and record of Vermont’s inhabitants; Clifford, a contemporary historian, created a complex portrait of the nineteenth century by close attention to gender; and Slayton himself borrowed Clifford’s account of Hemenway’s difficult life to point out to a large general audience the perils of over-romanticizing Vermont’s past.

Many regional historians today share this commitment to making local history immediately usable once again. In doing so they will confirm Wendell Berry’s warning: “If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are.”

NOTES

¹ Hal Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Randolph Roth, *Democratic Dilemma: Religion, Reform, and the Social Order in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Jeffrey Potash, *Vermont’s Burned-Over District: Patterns of Community Development and Religious Activity, 1761–1850* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, 1991); William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780–1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993); Samuel B. Hand, *The Star that Set: The Vermont Republican Party, 1854–1974* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2002).

² Nancy L. Gallagher, *Breeding Better Vermonters: The Eugenics Project in the Green Mountain State* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1999).