

THE WORK
OF
AMERICAN HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

BY
HENRY E. BOURNE



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American historical societies, like other American institutions, illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of decentralization. They are as diverse in aim and organization as the localities where they work or the periods when they originated. This diversity is encouraging, for it proves that the interest in history and the desire to collect historical material are not restricted to a few communities nor dependent upon two or three groups of individuals. The consequence must be a broader interpretation of American history. Students naturally inquire with filial care into the origins of their State or section, and out of a friendly strife of these rival interests comes a more catholic curiosity. To this is to be attributed, in part at least, the greater attention which for some years has been given to the growth of the West. History, like the center of population, has crossed the Alleghenies. The space given in manuals to the colonial period of the original States has been shortened in order to give more space to the colonial period of the States of the Central West and the West. In the creation of this broader interest the western historical societies have had an important share. But decentralization also has disadvantages, especially if it means isolated effort. The suc-

¹ A paper read at the Twentieth Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, December 29, 1904. A four page synopsis of this paper appears in the *Bulletin of Information No. 24* of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

cesses of modern historical investigation have been greatest where the scholars of a country have worked either upon a large common plan or under the stimulus of the suggestions and criticisms of their associates. Such a community of work is necessary to groups like historical societies as well as to individual scholars. The sense of what others are accomplishing quickens the laggards and directs the bewildered. The lack of an effectively organized influence of this kind partially accounts for the unevenness in the work of different societies. How much might be done by fuller coöperation is suggested by the important influence now exerted by example alone. Everywhere the achievements of societies like the Wisconsin, the Massachusetts, and the Pennsylvania are held up as proofs of what has or should be accomplished.

Historical societies are, broadly speaking, of two types, illustrated by the Massachusetts and the Wisconsin. The Massachusetts bears the name of a great Commonwealth, but it is not a State organization nor does it receive a subsidy from the State. Its resident membership is restricted—originally thirty, now one hundred. Membership is evidence of social prominence or of special achievement in historical investigation. The society is a characteristic product of a period and of a State in which higher education and similar scientific activities were, and are still, left mainly to private initiative and generosity. Of the same type are the New York and the Pennsylvania societies and, with some reservations, nearly all the eastern organizations. The Wisconsin Historical Society, on the other hand, is a State institution, palatially housed and generously supported

by the State. Its membership is unrestricted save by the payment of a small fee. Like the great State universities of the West, it is an example of the wise utilization of the public wealth to promote the intellectual interests of the community. But the contrast should not be pressed too far. The Wisconsin Society is not a State institution in the sense of being directly under official State management. Those who have directed its affairs have guarded against even the suspicion that politics should ever control it. It is rather a group of individuals, organized as a corporation, to which the State has entrusted the administration of important interests. In order that the State's interests may be preserved, the three leading State officials (Governor, Secretary of State, and State Treasurer) are ex-officio members of its executive committee of forty-two persons. Societies of the same type, avowedly patterned after it, exist in Minnesota, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, and in several other western States.

A minor peculiarity, which may be noted in passing, is that local societies in New England are generally town organizations, whereas south and west of the Hudson River they represent a county or district which has a common tradition, like the Wyoming Valley, or the Western Reserve. In eastern Massachusetts there are almost as many historical societies as there are towns. Nearly one hundred were in active existence in 1893, and several have been organized since that time. Outside New England, societies strictly local are either in large cities or have a special historical reason, like the Germantown Site and Relic Society, or the Vincennes Historical and Antiquarian Society.

The number of historical societies in the United States is between four and five hundred. Of these a little over three hundred were listed in the bibliography printed in the report of the American Historical Association for 1895. The forthcoming *Handbook of Learned Societies*, published by the Carnegie Institution, will contain more than a hundred others. Statistics of numbers do not reveal the strength or weakness of the movement. Societies may live in name only. Every year some cease to exist and others are organized. Besides the State or local societies, there are several national or regional organizations—some with a general aim like the American Antiquarian Society or the Southern History Association; others devoted to the history of a Church (for example, the American Baptist, the New England Methodist, the New England Catholic, and the Universalist); and still others like the Holland and the Huguenot societies, the German-American of Philadelphia or of Illinois, the Pennsylvania-German, or the Irish-American, which study the part their race has had in the development of the United States, and which in much of their work are akin to genealogical societies. There are several national organizations—The Society of the Cincinnati, of the Colonial Wars, of the Colonial Dames, of the Sons and of the Daughters of the American Revolution—which unite the descendants of colonial or revolutionary personages in preserving the memory of what their ancestors have accomplished and in cultivating a like patriotic spirit among themselves. They imply, even when they do not directly promote, much genealogical investigation. There are also purely genealogical societies, of which the most notable is

the New England Historic Genealogical Society. Indeed, organized research in genealogy is emphasized by many societies not founded primarily for this specific purpose. The reason is apparent. The genealogy of individuals is a form of history which appeals to many who are not interested in the genealogy of states or of institutions.

Of the State societies several, notably those of South Dakota and Arkansas, have been founded within the last few years. An attempt is being made to reorganize the work in the State of Washington. The older State Historical Society has been unable to accomplish much for years and another has been organized with the State University at Seattle as its headquarters. The California Society, which practically ceased to exist in 1895, has also been revived. The Missouri Historical Society, at St. Louis, being far removed from the State University, at Columbia, and having become in large measure localized, there has been established at the latter place the State Historical Society of Missouri, which will be devoted largely to the collection of a library, to be housed in the university library building. Perhaps the most interesting movement of late has been the division of the work in Alabama and Mississippi between a State Department of Archives and History and the State Historical Society. Something of the same kind is about to be attempted in Tennessee.

The programmes of the State and local historical societies are varied, but the work for which they provide may be analyzed as follows: the association of those actively engaged in historical investigation or who wish to exert an influence toward the promotion of historical studies; meet-

ings of members to read papers or to listen to addresses; the collection of manuscripts, books, and historical relics, maintaining these collections as public libraries and museums; marking historic sites; publication of papers or of documents of historic interest; reprinting rare pamphlets and books; and the support of public lectures. How many of these functions a society shall perform depends often as much upon circumstances as upon the preference of its managers. A society may excel as a collector of books in a special field. For example, the Minnesota Historical Society aims to possess a relatively complete collection of works on genealogy and town history—fields in which several of the other society libraries are also strong. The Pennsylvania Historical Society is rich in the local histories of England, Scotland, and Wales, as well as of the United States. The Wisconsin Society is also well equipped in the sources of British history. The Connecticut Historical Society has 1300 works on New England local history alone. The societies of Kansas and of Missouri emphasize the collection of complete files of all local newspapers; every editor or publisher who contributes his newspaper is a member of the society. This aim is partly the consequence of the fact that both societies were founded through the efforts of State press associations. Many societies serve as convenient repositories for family documents or letters of permanent interest. This function is particularly useful in a country where few families retain their public importance more than two or three generations, so that for lack of family archives such papers may be dispersed or lost. One has only to glance over the list of the

manuscripts of special value preserved in the archives of societies like the Connecticut or the Pennsylvania to realize the usefulness of such a function. In the series of the Pennsylvania Society are listed "the Penn Papers, 150 vols., Shippen Papers, 100 vols., Dreer Collection, 100 vols., Franklin Papers, 25 vols., Buchanan Papers, 50 vols.," etc., etc. In the Wisconsin Society is the now famous collection of the Draper MSS., in whose 400 stout folio volumes are papers of the Clark, Boone, Sumter, Brady, Patterson, Lewis, Preston, and other families of border renown. The most valuable publications of several societies are often editions of papers which have come into their possession by purchase or bequest. Recent illustrations are the volume of *General Heath's Letters* published by the Massachusetts Historical Society, and a collection of journals, letters, and muster rolls relating to the Dunmore War (1774) now in course of publication by the Wisconsin Society, which will be of great value to persons tracing their genealogies to the period of our colonial wars in the West.

The work of a society, State or local, depends especially upon the character of other agencies which partially occupy the same field. This is particularly true of the maintenance of libraries and of the preservation and publication of local or State records or papers. A society's work may be comprehensive if, as in Wisconsin, it is not merely an historical society, but the manager of the miscellaneous State library. Until 1875 a general State library had been maintained at Madison. The judges of the Supreme Court, who managed the State library wished, however, to centre its collection

on law books; the legislature, at their request, transferred to the larger library of the Historical Society all the miscellaneous works of reference, so that thenceforth the society's library became the miscellaneous library of the State. Until 1890, when it moved into its own new building, a mile away from the State House, the society's library was maintained as a general reference library, strongest however, in history, economics, and political science. Admitting the State University library to its building, a plan of differentiation of collection was arranged between them, the society's library—of course much the larger of the two—thereafter restricting itself to Americana, the British Empire, geography and travel, genealogy, and a few other lines; and the university library taking upon itself the other fields. While differently administered, the two libraries are now managed according to a common plan, and supply practically a common constituency—save that the society library has also in view the duty of assistance to the legislature and State officials, and the carrying out of an inter-library loan system throughout the Commonwealth; while its superintendent is *ex officio* a member of the State free library commission.

In Iowa the removal of the State capital from Iowa City to Des Moines the year the Historical Society was created made such complete coöperation impossible, but it was intended that the society should be in a sense “under the auspices of the State University.” Since 1901, as from 1857 to 1868, its collections have been preserved in one of the university halls. The growth of the collections of the State library at Des Moines led to the creation in 1882 of a

State Historical Department, which does much of the work ordinarily left to an historical society. In Alabama and Mississippi, what in Iowa has been the result of circumstances has been determined upon after a careful consideration of the problem. The Alabama Historical Society was reorganized in 1898. One of its first successes was the creation of an official History Commission charged with a report upon the sources and material of Alabama history. The report of the commission led to the establishment of a new State Department of Archives and History with the comprehensive task of caring for the State archives, collecting materials upon the history of the State, publishing official records and other historical materials, and the encouragement of historical work. The only part of the recommendations of the commission not adopted urged an annual appropriation of \$1,000 to enable the Historical Society to continue the publication of its *Transactions*. The existing collections of the society were, according to the agreement, given to the State, and the society remained chiefly as a means of affiliating those interested in historical studies. In Mississippi a similar department was created two years ago, but better provision was made for the coördinate activity of the Historical Society, with headquarters at the State University. Here were to center researches, the results of which the society was to publish. The State agreed to grant an annual subsidy of \$1,000 to assist the work of publication. As in Alabama, the society turned over to the State its collections and left to the Director of Archives and History the duty of editing public records for publication. In a sense the society was to control the policy of the

Department, for the executive committee was to be the first Board of Trustees, with the power of filling vacancies. Such a plan seems a wise utilization of forces, especially where the university is not located in the capital of the State.

In Michigan and Illinois still another arrangement exists. The historical society is actually or virtually a part of the State library. But in neither is there much coöperation with the university.

Several of the older States which do not subsidize, or do not have a distinctively State historical society, have long been engaged, through the officials of the State libraries or through editors especially appointed, in collecting and editing their colonial or State records. New York, according to her State Historian, has, since 1885, been expending annually about \$50,000 for this purpose. Occasionally where there is a State historical society it has become the agent of the State in such work. New Hampshire adopted this method at first but subsequently appointed an Editor of State Papers. The New Jersey Historical Society is still engaged in publishing the State archives, for which the State appropriates \$3,500 a year. Here the decision to undertake publication was the result of an agitation begun by the society many years before the legislature was persuaded to take favorable action. Maryland, in 1882, made the historical society custodian and publisher of her archives prior to 1776, and appropriates \$3,000 a year towards the expenses of the work. The Iowa State Historical Society has in course of publication the *The Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Iowa*. Even where a society is not so employed it may exert an effective influence in

promoting the direct publication by the State of such records. In Pennsylvania it was through the efforts of the American Philosophical Society and the Pennsylvania Historical Society that the legislature in 1837 directed the publication of the *Minutes of the Provincial Council*, the first of several important series of State publications. The Massachusetts Historical Society is credited with defending the editor of the *Province Laws* in the chronic warfare waged against their publication.

The fact that a State undertakes the publication of its own records does not crowd the local society out of a useful occupation. As already intimated, some of the strongest societies find sufficient occupation in publishing the papers which have come into their possession. They also reprint rare books and pamphlets. Many restrict their work to essays or addresses read at their meetings and to occasional documents.

There is much diversity also in the form of publication. Several societies issue what are called "Collections" or "Proceedings," or "Transactions," which often are virtually non-periodical magazines. The societies of Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Ohio, Iowa, Texas, and Oregon, maintain periodical "Magazines," or "Registers," or "Quarterlies." A few town societies in Massachusetts publish historical magazines, but they are mainly devoted to genealogy.

Occasionally an historical society is under the same management as the local association for the advancement of science. Many of the early historical societies had an aim as comprehensive as the original aim of the Massachusetts

Historical Society, which provided for the "collection of observations and discoveries in natural history and topography, together with specimens of natural and artificial curiosities and a selection of everything which can improve and promote the historical knowledge of our country, either in a physical or political view." The Vermont Historical Society included three departments—History, Natural History, and Horticulture. In Minnesota five out of the eleven departments provided for in the by-laws of 1879 are scientific rather than historical. Colorado embodies the same combination in the name, State Historical and Natural History Society. Several local organizations are similarly comprehensive, notably the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society at Wilkes-Barré, the Bridgeport Scientific and Historical Society, and the Essex Institute of Salem, Massachusetts.

The work any Society can undertake is quite as often dependent upon the size and stability of its income as upon the other circumstances to which reference has been made. If it has no resources save membership fees, its activities are necessarily restricted. Small incomes are absorbed by the salary account if there is a library or museum and nothing is left for the purchase of books or to pay for publication. Even endowed societies are under the necessity of providing for publication expenses out of special funds. The Maryland Historical Society has reported that the falling off in the income of the Peabody Fund has led to delay in the appearance of what are termed "Fund Publications." Many of the publications of the Massachusetts Historical Society were paid for from a similar fund. To

meet this need the New York Historical Society has resorted to an interesting plan, creating a Publication Fund divided into shares, sold originally at \$25, now at \$100, each shareholder being entitled to a full set of Fund publications.

The largest societies without State support are the Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania. Their annual expenditures are respectively \$18,000, \$12,000, and \$24,000. Several eastern societies, which for ordinary purposes rely chiefly upon receipts from membership fees or income from bequests, receive a small subsidy from the State. In Maine this depends upon publication, in New Hampshire it is \$500, in Vermont it is \$100 for binding, in Rhode Island \$1,500, in Connecticut \$1,000 chiefly for publication, in New Jersey \$3,500 for publication of State archives, as already stated, and in Maryland \$3,000 for the same purpose. West of the Alleghenies only a few States, and these with one or two exceptions in the South, do not grant liberal subsidies to the State Historical Society. Wisconsin appropriates the largest amount, \$43,000 (\$20,000 directly); Iowa (the Historical Society and the Historical Department) \$17,500, Minnesota, \$15,000; Kansas and Ohio between seven and eight thousand; and Nebraska five. There are a few instances of local grants, of which the most liberal is that of Buffalo, namely, \$5,000. Watertown, Massachusetts, pays the town society \$1,000 annually to assist in the publication of the town records. At least two boards of county commissioners in Pennsylvania grant \$200 or \$250 to their county organizations under the provisions of a law which permits such grants to the oldest society in each county.

One cannot review even in the most cursory fashion the work of American historical societies without being impressed by the number of centers of activity and the substantial results already accomplished. If there are societies that are moribund, this is due either to the lack of an income sufficient to enable some one, in the words of Mr. Thwaites, to "devote his entire time to the work, becoming personally responsible for the conduct of the society's affairs, and imparting to it life and individual character," or to a loss of consciousness on the part of its directors of what other societies are doing. Part of the remedy lies in greater coöperation among societies in the same State and between the societies and the historical faculties of the local universities. In a few States, like Iowa, it is arranged that local societies are members of the State society and may each send a voting delegate to meetings. The importance of intimate relations between the societies and historical faculties is evident from the fact that the larger faculties with their bodies of graduate students are virtually historical societies engaged in important researches, the results of which appear in published theses or in series of publications like the *Columbia Studies in History, Economics, and Public Law*, the *Harvard Historical Studies*, and the *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*. The relations of these two bodies are especially intimate in Wisconsin, Iowa, Nebraska, and Mississippi. The membership of several of the older societies, like the Massachusetts, the Rhode Island, and the Pennsylvania, includes members of the faculties of Harvard, Brown, and the University of Pennsylvania. It is difficult to establish such relations unless the two are conveniently near each other.

Is it possible to increase the coöperation between the societies as a whole? Those most actively interested in them are generally members either of the American Library Association or of the American Historical Association. Last September, at St. Louis, steps were taken to affiliate, for common work on the history of the Louisiana Purchase, the societies of States and Territories once included within its limits and of neighboring States. In France the historical societies, with the other scientific associations, hold an annual congress which is much like the annual meetings of the American Historical Association. The congress is directed by the *comité des travaux historiques* which is appointed by the ministry of public instruction. If some common direction is needed in a highly centralized country like France, where the intellectual life centers in Paris, it is much more necessary here. The necessity is present, the materials are at hand, the question is, What shall be done?

HENRY E. BOURNE

WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY
CLEVELAND