

THE LOCAL HISTORIAN IN NEW YORK¹

THE local historian in New York state is a public official. His functions and duties are described in the Education Law. His appointment is provided for by law. He is appointed by local public officials. He is paid, if at all, and receives expenses, if any, out of locally raised public funds.

It is relevant therefore to refer to the law and to discover what it contains and what it omits. It is equally important to discuss what the local historians' opportunities are in addition to the duties enumerated in the law. It is also important to know what may be done eventually to change the law, and to make the work more effective.

According to the Education Law² of the state of New York, the local historian is expected "to collect and preserve material relating to the history of the political subdivision for which he or she is appointed." The statute provides further that "such historian shall examine into the condition, classification and safety from fire of the public records of the public offices" in the political subdivisions of the state "and shall call to the attention of the local authorities and the State Historian any material of local value which should be acquired for preservation." The local historian is expected to make an annual report to the local appointing authorities and to the state historian. Upon retirement or removal from office he or she is required to turn over to his or her successor "all materials gathered during his or her incumbency and all correspondence relating thereto."

According to the law each county may have a county historian. Each city, town, and village is required to have an historian. If all appointments were made, there would be about sixteen hundred local historians in New York state. Actually there are about nine hundred at the present time. One of the difficulties in securing appointments is that the law provides that "such historian shall serve without compensation, unless the governing board . . . shall otherwise provide." Local authorities are, however, empowered to "ap-

¹ A paper read at the eighth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, November 9, 1944.

² The organization and administration of the work of the local historians is in charge of the state historian, who serves immediately under the associate commissioner for higher and professional education in the State Education Department. The work of the historians is thus closely associated with the educational program of the state.

propriate, raise by tax and expend moneys for historical purposes within their several jurisdictions." In the localities in which there are the most forward-looking public-spirited local authorities we find a tendency to provide some funds for salary and expense accounts for the local historians. A great deal still remains to be done. As a matter of interest the law provides also that "local authorities . . . are hereby authorized and empowered . . . to contract with the trustees of an historical association . . . for the support of any or all historical edifices situated within the boundaries" of their own local area.

Nowhere in the law is there any provision regarding the qualifications which local historians should have nor is any provision made for training them or for the termination of the incumbency of any particular person. These and other gaps will need to be filled in in the course of time. A beginning is already being made.

It should be apparent from the laws relating to local historians in New York state that they are regarded as public servants performing a public service. But what is the public service? The public service may be defined as fulfilling the needs and the wants of the public with respect to any aspect of people's business or recreational life. This means that if information is sought by any person within the state, and for that matter outside of the state, concerning any historical materials relating to his business or to his recreational life the local historian is obligated to try to get the information. This may appear to be requiring a great deal of local historians but I believe this interpretation of the duties of a public servant is a sound one.

The first and most important function of the local historian is that of assisting all other local officers. The county historian should be prepared to assist the county clerk, county treasurer, the board of supervisors and even the county court in their performance of the public business. In like manner city, town, and village historians should be prepared to assist local officers in their respective subdivisions. If they are to perform these duties to the best advantage, they need to collect and preserve such public records as are not being properly looked after. It is only too evident that when town and village offices change hands records are left in attics or barns and are not transferred to the new incumbents in the local offices. It is very definitely the function of the local historian to see that these records are properly preserved, even if he has to place them in a

special depository of his own. Not infrequently we hear of cases where records of considerable importance are discovered which are put to good use in the settlement of claims either public or private.

We suggest that local historians make copies of the minutes of town and village boards so that in case the originals are lost there will be duplicates. We ask them to copy church registers of the period prior to the 1880's when the Vital Statistics Law first went into effect. We also ask them to copy the names in old graveyards and to secure dates of birth and death where there is any evidence to be found. We suggest that they keep newspaper files and collect correspondence which is purely of a local nature, photographs and the like.

Owing to the impact of the war on local communities we have under way in New York state what is being done elsewhere—a war records program. We have been and are laying particular emphasis upon the collection of information concerning the services of men and women in the armed forces. Through collaboration with county and city historians we drew up a war service records form, which is in no sense a state form but which is being used in a number of counties and in additional local communities. The information is gathered by city, town, and village historians or by volunteers directed by them. One copy of the information is kept by the city, town, or village historian and one copy is forwarded to the county historian. We have felt that it is far better to encourage local interest and local effort through a program of decentralization than to request or to require that copies of all service forms be sent to the state historian's office in Albany. The local war councils have been instructed to appoint as recording officers local historians wherever possible. This means that when the Offices of Civilian Defense and Civilian Mobilization close up in the localities which they serve there should be local historians who can take over the records intact because they themselves have been the recording officers. We are not certain at this time that this program is being effectively carried out but it is a part of the over-all picture which we are trying to carry through.

Local historians are also being encouraged to collect other kinds of war records, particularly the records of activities in the communities such as the accomplishments of service clubs, fraternal organizations, and the Red Cross. We have not asked them to do very much about preserving the records of war industry because we realize that they

are not in a position to do it effectively. We have asked them to assist in the waste paper salvage campaign by seeing to it that considerable quantities of waste paper are actually salvaged and at the same time to see that no valuable historical materials are destroyed.

Assisting local officers and collecting various kinds of records are only one part of the job of the local historian. In New York state there are approximately one hundred and thirty-five privately organized historical societies. It is extremely important that there should be no clash between the officially appointed historians and the members of local historical societies. We therefore urge all local historians to become active members of and to participate vigorously in the work of historical societies in the hope that the association of the two will bring strength to both. As a matter of fact, a number of the local historians already have their headquarters in the rooms of the local societies. We are encouraging local historians also to assist the teachers in the local schools in carrying through the social studies program through the elementary and secondary school grades. They can provide teachers with materials for instructional purposes. They can help organize historical trips and pageants and in many ways assist historical instruction. We are encouraging the local historians also to assist the many libraries to be found in small communities and to assist the local museums as well. In fact, we feel that the historical society, the local library, and the museum are so closely associated that they can further the work of local history if the local historian will take some initiative in the matter.

There remain the problems of research and publication. Because the great majority of local historians are not interested in research as such or in writing, we are encouraging them to make known what materials they have available for those who wish to write. Where they themselves are interested in writing, we try to encourage them to do that. It might be said that there is no uniform pattern which can be followed in this regard.

It would not be sound practice, even if it were possible, to require a uniform pattern of office arrangements for local historians. At the present time some county historians have their offices in the county buildings, some in historical societies' headquarters, others in libraries, an occasional one in his home. City, town, and village historians show no greater uniformity in their office arrangements, except that town and village historians too frequently keep all their records in their

own homes. What needs to be emphasized is that all local historians should build for the future. They should remember that some day others will succeed them in office and they should accordingly see to it that whatever they do there can and will be continuous development of the work.

One serious lack hitherto has been the absence of a program designed to train local historians once they have been appointed. Plans are now under way to provide in Albany in the summer of 1945 and succeeding summers a training program which it is hoped will be attended by volunteers, their expenses to be financed by the local authorities. The program itself envisions instruction in the collection and preservation of different types of primary sources, private and official, simple museum and library techniques, and assistance to elementary and secondary schools.

Further to encourage their training and their efficiency there was formed in October, 1944, the New York State Association of County Historians. Its membership includes all county and city historians, as well as town and village historians who are recommended for membership by their own county historians. The association has announced as its objectives the following: increasing the efficiency and improving the status of its members; encouraging the collection and preservation of records of all kinds; working with the state historian to complete an index of historical source materials in the state; aiding research and publication relating to local history; co-operating with public officers in the subdivisions of the state in carrying out their duties.

Some years will elapse before the local historians will all be functioning effectively. This is because it will be necessary to educate the local public authorities to the need of appointing adequately qualified persons and of paying them salaries and expenses, a condition of affairs which fortunately does exist in a number of counties, and to a lesser degree in the other subdivisions of the state. But if the local authorities are to be won over to the program, those local historians who are now appointed must be trained to do their jobs, they must perform the kind of public service which is invaluable to other local officers and in the communities in which they live. If they do these things, then we shall have a demand from all over the state for changes in the law which will establish qualifications, civil service status, pay and expenses. In the meantime, we can do much to

encourage local historians to remember that they are public servants and to perform their duties accordingly; and we can do much to encourage the local authorities to recognize the work of the local historians.

It is hardly any exaggeration to say that the local historian who best performs the functions which are here outlined can be extraordinarily instrumental in developing community pride and local patriotism. We believe that the strength and vigor of local communities is to a great degree a measure of the strength and vitality of our nation. If we are to preserve the fundamentals of American life and the strength of its democracy, we had better keep alive an interest in the living past from which come the foundations on which our American life is built. To preserve our democracy we must know how our democratic system has emerged in the past. We must likewise cherish the continuous development of our American heritage in the future. There can be no better way than to collect and to preserve the records of the past and the present as guides for the present and the future.

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