

The Notion of History and its Importance for a Community

by

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History is not simply a rendition of facts from the past. Human beings first began to think historically when they moved beyond an understanding of time narrowly restricted to such phenomena as one's individual life span or seasonal cycles. As a method of thinking, history started when people began to recognize discernible events and social changes in which the people themselves are consciously involved and in which those people – or others – set out to influence those events or social transformations.

As a way of thinking, then, history is the use of one's reason to comprehend the world around us and to in some way have an influence upon it. Hence an examination of "facts" is not the straightforward proposition it initially appears to be. It is not so much the facts themselves that should concern us as it is instead the mindset of the researcher who is using the facts to tell a story. Why those facts were selected, and how they are presented, is as important a consideration as the facts themselves.

This of course takes us to the heart of this short discussion. If history is as much about interpretation as it is about what happened, then what does this mean for a community such as Genesee County? And why is this important?

We are therefore ushered into the special kind of history that is mandated by the Historians Law of 1919, in which the New York state legislature mandated official historians for every "city, town, or village" in the state. By its nature the Historians Law formalized the importance of the special kind of history taken so seriously in the Empire State – local history. But like history in general, local history too is about the selection and interpretation of facts – which means that to understand local history is to appreciate that like history in general, there are

numerous approaches and concerns serving to defy a simple response to such questions as what is local history, and what is its importance to a community?

It is possible to offer some responses to those questions. To begin with, local history, like history in general, is a study of individual people, or groups of people, or of events. But local history is a focus within these contexts upon a specific geographical region, which for our purposes is Genesee County. While the focal point is Genesee County, the exploration of historical evidence should be situated within a comparative framework that unites Genesee County to regional and national developments. But that inherent broadness is not one that only takes us back and forth between Genesee County and the wider world – it is also a large exploration of the many strands making up the tapestry of Genesee County itself.

Therefore, despite the limited geographical focus of Genesee County, local history displays the same sensitivity to social, cultural, economic, and political trends that the wider field of history itself exhibits. One should add that the County's religious and intellectual history is also the concern of the local historian. For example, to understand decades of political trends in the County one has to look at the place of ideas – witness the role played by writers ranging from Will Durant to Aldous Huxley to Ernest Hemingway in the intellectual formation of a young Barber B. Conable, Jr., the long-serving Congressman from western New York.

Local history, then, is as broad and complex a field of inquiry as history in general is. Studying Genesee County could lead to an examination of how people responded to the Great Depression or to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. It could induce one to think about how the struggle for female suffrage played out locally. It could also direct our attention to the workings of municipal government as revealed in the minutes of the Board of Supervisors. It could even induce us to think about architectural ideas and applications – when the architectural historian David P. Handlin in *The American Home, 1815-1915* analyzes design approaches one could ponder how those methods manifested themselves in the building of homes in Genesee County during that same period.

Looking at building designs means the possibility of investigating other areas of culture. The products produced by local manufacturers and farmers, along with games played and clothing worn – all constitute the stuff of local history here in Genesee County. In other words, local history includes a variety of historical forms, and the local historian is called upon to deploy a host of historical methods, such as interviews, literary analysis, and even statistics in order to reconstruct what life was like at another moment in time.

But all of this still leaves unanswered a pivotal question – why is history important to a community such as Genesee County? One way of answering this question is to speak of history as comforting. When one is faced with challenges in one's own time, there is a measure of solace in realizing that people who came before us faced equally daunting problems in a myriad of ways. Ironically, the past becomes a personal source of wisdom capable of providing a surprising amount of comfort.

But clearly, the worth of history for a community has other aspects as well. For instance, there is the very positive effect of local history on young people. Students seemingly disengaged from a school's social studies curriculum come to life when encountering old newspapers and other pieces of historical evidence from an area they have grown up in. These young people become excited when they examine photographs of neighborhoods they are familiar with or how earlier immigrant groups fared in their locale. Teenagers for whom history had been a dry academic chore now becomes a repository of all that had gone on before in their village or town, and they revel in the excitement of that discovery.

The benefits of history for the community extend to the need of some to connect to their past – a past easily recognizable on the local level. Consequently, these people enjoy contact with old manuscripts and objects ranging from kitchen devices to pottery. Not only do such people fulfill a deep desire to literally touch the past, but in their quest to locate and preserve historical artifacts they offer something of value to society at large. This value is also intangible, for it goes to the heart of a person's self-identity as that self-image is rooted in a community's heritage.

This is another way of saying that a past that is remembered and reflected upon becomes an important component of a person's self-image. This awareness of the self is made up of two parts – the obviously personal and the shared history that constitutes community. Discovering the past enables one to a fashion a clearer self-identity – and clearer self-identity means a more stable and contented community equipped to cope with the complexities that life inherently presents.

The reconstruction of the past is also of obvious use to leaders in the community responsible for such projects as public policy. While it is certainly a mistake to assume that all aspects of the past will repeat themselves, it is arguably true that what has happened is connected to what is and what will be. History establishes circumstances that condition the present and the future. As a result, a study of those circumstances can help decision-makers opt for choices that are based on informed knowledge and judgment instead of a mere hunch.

In the end, then, the worth of history for the community is simply the worthwhile sharing of knowledge about where we live and work – Genesee County. We want to learn about the place we spend our lives in and, in some instances, to share what we have learned with others. Whether that sharing takes place via the written word, or through exhibits, or even through the media, the goal is to satisfy the very human desire for memory – which is to say a very human desire for history.