Keepers of Our Past: Local Historical Writing in the United States, 1820S-1930S

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David J. Russo established his credentials as a thoughtful observer of historians' work on localized topics with an earlier book, *Families and Communities: A New Look at American History* (1974). In that volume, he focused on the contemporary state of historical research and writing. Russo contended that, by devoting their attention to grassroots topics, modern scholars could better illuminate the variety of American life. Communities and families, he argued, offered the best perspective for understanding the diversity and particularity of the American experience. Now in *Keepers of Our Past*, Russo explores an earlier era of historical writing. He summarizes the ways nineteenth-century nonacademic historians, amateurs, and commercial entrepreneurs dealt with a localized past. The nineteenth century stirred both a vast effort to collect and record local information and a narrow, parochial, antiquarian use of such material. Russo finds further confirmation of his earlier argument that family and community history deserves a different approach as well as more serious and careful attention than it has generally received.

Russo defines local history rather restrictively as town or city history. Thus he passes over prerevolutionary historiography largely without comment because, he argues, it focused on entire colonies, not local communities. He does not make clear why William Bradford's history of Plymouth or other classic Puritan accounts of colonial development do not fit his definition of local history. Russo sees American local historical activity—records collecting, historical society founding, and writing—as emerging in the immediate postrevolutionary years. During the same time efforts to come to terms with American nationhood, character, and identity were also beginning.

Russo concentrates on book-length community histories that appeared in substantial numbers in New England, especially Massachusetts, beginning in the 1820s. Although quite varied in their approach, almost all of the fifty-seven antebellum works he examined were descriptive accounts focusing on topography, physical description, and formal civic and religious developments. Long-standing community residents, usually members of the elite, prepared most such volumes. They were neither experienced writers nor followers of any common model. As nonanalytical recordings of selected information about a community's past, their works were purely antiquarian. They repre-
resented antiquarianism at its finest, Russo argues, because of their gen-
erally high regard for factual accuracy. But even the best early nineteenth-
century local historian, John F. Watson of Philadelphia, provided no
more than “a vast sprawling compendium of information.”

After the Civil War, local historical writing diversified and flour-
ished. Particularly in the towns of New England, but elsewhere through-
out the country as well, enthusiasts continued to pursue the antebellum
antiquarian approach. Emerging large cities spawned historians whose
methods resembled town historians, but who were forced to deal with
the greater complexity of the metropolis. While town histories enjoyed
only limited, local circulation, these newer city histories attracted a
broader audience. A few individuals went beyond the study of a single
community to undertake histories of several localities. Russo sees these
“repeaters” as starting to move at least some local historians away from
an exclusive preoccupation with their own nearby world.

The most striking change, in an immediate sense, was the emer-
gence of local history as a lucrative commercial venture. Commercial
histories, produced by a few national firms, became widespread. Sold
by advanced subscription and compiled by traveling professionals, they
featured the biographies and family or business histories of subscribers.
Derisively referred to as “mug books” and appropriately criticized for
lack of balance and objectivity, these works did, Russo argues, bring to-
gether much information that would otherwise have been lost. They
provide a reasonably useful picture of the upper levels of the local social
structure, that is, those who could afford to subscribe and were inclined
to be included. Urban historical encyclopedias were similar in character
though larger in scale. Like earlier writing on local topics, commercial
histories tended to treat each community in isolation, concentrate on
progress, and avoid substantial analysis, especially of a critical nature.
They epitomized, and helped tarnish, local history as history “of the suc-
cessful, by the successful, for the successful.”

History’s late nineteenth-century evolution as an academic field,
the development of a widely accepted methodology, and the formation
of practitioners’ associations had profound consequences for local his-
tory. At first, amateur local historians and scholarly professionals co-
operated, but before long academics conveyed a sense that local
history’s vision was too narrow and its method too uncritical to be taken
seriously. Academics wished to emphasize national development,
transcendent patterns, universal experiences. Russo sees the 1930s as the
decade when local history was finally supplanted by nationally focused
history. Scholars of historiography might argue that the transition came
earlier in the century, if not before. They would, however, no doubt
agree with Russo that local history remained in low repute until the
scholarly reconsiderations of the 1960s led to the emergence of the new social history with its fusion of sophisticated methodology and locally focused investigations. In recent years, the interweaving of local and national studies that Russo has been advocating may finally be occurring.

Russo has raised, directly or indirectly, some worthwhile questions for historians of every circumstance. Why do scholars, amateur researchers, readers, and museum goers choose to focus on the topics they do? How do our individual circumstances, our relationships to our topics, and our means of communicating with others who share our interests shape our efforts? What has conditioned us to consider some topics important and others less so? How do we evaluate or make use of other historical approaches? Should we be content to be antiquarians, satisfied to heap up information about the past that has nostalgic, patriotic, or progress-affirming value? Or should we regard history as an analytical tool of broad application for the illumination of contemporary situations and choices, a tool that is only as good as it is thorough, critical, and sophisticated? While sharper definitions and more detailed analysis of individual nineteenth-century works would further stimulate discussion of these issues, David Russo has performed a service for all historians, and local historians in particular, by examining an era of great enthusiasm for local history in the United States.


**REVIEWED BY LAWRENCE H. LARSEN, UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-KANSAS CITY**

Eric H. Monkkonen's new book, *America Becomes Urban*, deals directly with the period 1780 to 1980, but traces the development of the American city to a complicated nonideological process that extends back thousands of years to ancient Mesopotamia. Very little in the book touches directly on Iowa. Monkkonen, a professor of history at the University of California, Los Angeles, has written extensively about the American urban police. He believes that the only way to understand the present condition of cities in the United States is to look at their historical antecedents. Unlike many urban affairs scholars, Monkkonen stresses the importance of the practical technical legal problems associated with city building. "From their corporate status cities derive a surprising array of powers. They can borrow and lend, build and destroy, expand and contract, appear and disappear. They are not inevitable physical manifestations of vague economic and social and geographical forces, but creatures—in law 'persons'—endowed by legislation with the power to act" (xii).