Introduction

If the historical societies in the United States today were to be characterized in a single word, no doubt the word would be, “variety.” Some historical societies, like the Massachusetts Historical Society focus on national history, while others specialize in the history of a particular state or locality, such as the Oregon Historical Society, or the Chicago Historical Society. There are historical societies specific to particular ethnic and religious groups, such as the American Jewish Historical Society, or topics of historical interest, such as the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society. Also common are societies that specialize in pioneer history, genealogy, or preservation of antiques or historic buildings. Examples are The Pioneer Historical Society of Benford County, Inc., the Louisiana Genealogical and Historical Society, and the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, respectively. A good way to appreciate the breadth of variety among historical societies is to take a look at the list of repositories of primary sources put together by the University of Idaho. It contains links to over 5250 websites which describe the various holdings (manuscripts, archives, rare books, photographs, etc) of different repositories worldwide.

Historical societies also vary in size and in funding sources; some are almost entirely publicly funded and employ hundreds of people to oversee their various departments, which typically include libraries, archives, and museums, as well as historic preservation and educational outreach programs. Others are privately funded and small, but hold valuable collections. While the stated mission of most historical societies includes the intention to collect, preserve, and make available the documents and artifacts of history, societies prioritize these activities often quite differently, juggling competing demands, such as those put forth by community members and those expected by academia.

This variety makes historical societies difficult to summarize. A look at the historical evolution of historical societies, however, provides insight into the origins of this diversity and helps to make sense of the challenges faced by employees of historical societies today. Equipped with an understanding of the background of diverse types of historical societies, prospective historical society employees can choose the organization best suited for them.

History

Concerned elite citizens during the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first two decades of the nineteenth century formed the earliest historical societies in the United States. While European countries had many excellent libraries and were beginning to form historical societies during the eighteenth century, the libraries of the United States were relatively insignificant, and there were few places to deposit important documents and manuscripts pertaining to the history of the developing nation. Recognizing that valuable materials were becoming lost or ruined, private benefactors such as Reverend Jeremy Belknap, founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1791, donated collections and money to budding organizations designed to collect and preserve
items that would help future generations understand their American heritage. One of the primary activities of early societies, also seen as a preservation activity, included reprinting manuscripts for wider dissemination.(1)

These earliest societies set the standard for the historical organizations that emerged during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the 1850s, nearly all the states east of the Mississippi had organized historical societies; local historical societies were flourishing, and pioneer organizations were popping up in the West. (2) The founders, members, and officers of these societies were typically educated men of the professional classes, as they were the ones with the leisure and authority to take up such ventures. Despite their interest in scholarship, these men were largely amateurs by today’s standards and frequently collected materials that served primarily to memorialize famous men or to record their locality’s or organization’s role in a specific conception of national progress and destiny. (3) The scope of their collections as well as the base of their membership was typically narrow.

There are some exceptions to the exclusionary nature of early historical societies. While the vast majority was primarily privately funded, particularly on the Atlantic seaboard, some received minor state appropriations or privileges, such as permission to house their collections in public buildings.(4) The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, however, was one of the first to succeed without the help of a major private benefactor. Reorganized in 1855 as a trustee of the state, the Wisconsin society rejected the traditional model of an aristocratic society with an exclusive membership base in favor of developing a strong library for the benefit of scholars at large. It became an important influence to later public societies, particularly those in the Midwest and in the South after the Civil War.(5)

While societies became increasingly more democratic in their membership policies, large groups of people continued to be excluded or underrepresented in the activities, products, and scholarship sponsored by historical societies. For example, as the discipline of history became professionalized in the United States in the 1880s, many prominent historical societies added professional historians to their staff and began publishing journals geared toward academics.(6) However, the new professional standard favored national history over local history, and increasingly this standard overshadowed the work of amateurs who continued to preserve local history materials in less-esteemed historical societies.(7)

It was not until the Progressive Era that historical societies came to be seen as institutions with a capacity or obligation to serve the public. During this time of unsettling rapid change, citizens increasingly placed a premium on public education as a means for social uplift. Progressive Era reformers stressed the ability of education to perfect mankind. Some historical societies shifted their objectives and began to embrace this new form of social responsibility.(8) The museums of these historical societies changed from their former state of being mere “cabinet of curiosities” to including exhibits that engaged and educated the public. Additionally, more historical societies developed relationships with schools and sponsored commemorative centennials and pageants. Under the leadership of Reuben Gold Thwaites, Wisconsin’s historical society was one of the first to make this transformation.(9)

The public’s interest in the activities of local historical societies increased significantly during the twentieth century. A number of factors influenced this trend. At the turn of the century the public became increasingly concerned about preserving the history of cities that were undergoing
architectural and demographic changes. The vast cultural changes brought on by immigration prompted some groups to preserve the history of communities’ founding families. The increasing affluence of American society after World War II meant Americans had more leisure time to dedicate toward an interest in history. The advent, and later the affordability, of the automobile enabled historic shrines and sites to become popular destinations. Additionally, the postwar urban renewal of the 1950s caused many to become concerned for the preservation of historic architecture that was slowly disappearing. Aided by the expanding economy and the increased availability of both private and public funding, diverse historical societies formed or expanded to meet these interests.(10)

The founding of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) in 1940 reflected this growing appreciation of local history. In 1958, the AASLH transcribed the debates from the discussion panels at their fourteenth annual convention and printed them as the book, Ideas in Conflict. In the Preface of the book, Director Clifford Lord of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin pointed to “a growing conviction…that the historical society was only partly fulfilling its function in the modern era if it continued only to serve higher scholarship, whether academic or lay.” When the academic historians abandoned local history, he explained, a chasm grew between the public and their history. Local historical societies were luckily bridging this chasm, he claimed.(11)

However, as the debates within the AASLH’s discussion panels hinted, not everyone within the historical society community was entirely keen with the new focus on public outreach. The sharpest criticism came in 1962 from Walter Muir Whitehill, author of Independent Historical Societies. Employed by four of the United States’ oldest private historical societies – the Massachusetts Historical Society, the American Antiquarian Society, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and the Virginia Historical Society - Whitehill set out to explain why the older societies were having such a hard time staying afloat financially. Whitehill concluded that while public institutions received large sums of money for the purpose of disseminating popular, “feel-good” history, older institutions, which prioritized collecting, preserving and publishing primarily for academic historians, were finding it hard to compete. Meaningful scholarship was the price society paid for the popularization of history, thought Whitehill, and according to him, it was not a profitable trade-off.(12)

Some of Whitehill’s concerns were addressed by Congress with the authorization of appropriations allowing the National Historical Publications and Records Commission to offer grants to institutions for documentary publishing in 1964 and for historical records preservation in 1974.(13) However, the tension between fundraising and juggling education and outreach functions with preservation and academic publication functions is still alive within the historical society community today.

Although local history was gaining acceptance, by mid-century the collections of both privately-funded and publicly-funded historical societies were still largely centered on the accomplishments of white men. By the late sixties, however, academic historians increasingly became interested in the point of view of minorities. The history of previously neglected groups, such as women and ethnic minorities, gained more attention in academic circles. Within a decade, most historical societies shared in this new philosophy, and their collecting practices expanded to include ethnic minorities, working class families, and immigrants. The transition within historical societies was aided in part by an oversupply of academically trained historians in the seventies. As university jobs became scarce,
professional historians flooded the societies. The shift also reflected a growing number of women and minorities serving as elected officials on institutional boards.(14)

Although the scholarship on the history of historical societies lacks a recent survey of existing societies in the United States that analyzes such variables as functional priorities and funding sources, it is safe to say that as a whole, historical societies have embraced a more democratic outlook with regard to public outreach and education. The recent transformation of the Virginia Historical Society is a case in point. In the 1950’s the society operated solely on private funds, and its board of trustees consisted entirely of white males, mostly descendants from founding families. Membership was by invitation only. Its collections consisted primarily of colonial manuscripts, Civil War papers, and rare books that were used almost exclusively by scholars. In the 1990’s the society averaged 60,000 visitors annually, quite an increase from the fifties' visitation average of one thousand. The society’s museum exhibits attempt to reflect the new diversity of the visitors, board members, and employees. While endowment money continues to support its budget, the society increasingly relies upon state appropriations and earned income.(15)

In recent years, advocates within local historical societies in particular have become increasingly vocal about the benefits of interpreting history in a way that reflects the perspectives of the demographics of the locality. As Barbara Franco, the executive director of the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. writes, “Rather than viewing themselves as elite or scholarly experts who take responsibility for telling the community’s history, historical societies increasingly see themselves as facilitators who are helping various communities within the city tell their stories.” (16)

This approach not only reflects a general trend toward multiculturalism within the academic community, it is also indicative of a new emphasis on public relations. Without as much state and federal support available as in the past, historical societies are becoming increasingly dependent on a strong membership base and on income earned through popular publications and museum gift store sales. A strong relationship with the local community is essential to this equation. One way that historical societies have improved this relationship is through the use of technology. Computer-based search engines make research more user-friendly. Also, many historical societies offer engaging websites on which viewers can see digitized portions of their collections. These websites serve as windows into the organizations, enticing the public to visit and to support the societies.

As the functions of historical societies have expanded over the years, the variety of work available within them has changed also. Most societies of considerable size employ librarians, curators of collections and exhibits, and editors of publications to carry out the functions typical of the earliest historical societies. Since the 1970’s, education directors have been common additions to societies’ payrolls. These employees manage the societies’ public programs and school group visits.(17) Tour guides and docents work directly with the visiting public.(18) Within the last decade, individuals with computer and Web skills are increasingly in demand, as more historical societies attempt to organize their new digitized collections and to create searchable databases. Reflecting the recent emphasis on public relations, current historical societies typically employ people to do fundraising, marketing, store management, and membership and volunteer coordination.(19)

While smaller historical societies typically do not have the distinct departments that larger societies have, many attempt to carry out the same array of functions. This means that the employees of smaller societies need to have multiple skills and be prepared to perform a variety of duties.(20) To a certain extent, the same could be said of the larger societies. For example, while the
The most important requirement of past historical society directors used to be a dedication to scholarship, today most directors have a strong background in academic history but also possess extensive fund raising and management skills. (21)

The history of historical societies illustrates that historical organizations can be dynamic institutions which are responsive to trends within the discipline of history. They do not necessarily respond to these changes in the exact same way and at the exact same rate, however. The movement toward public inclusion, for example, has provided historical societies with new challenges as they seek to juggle sometimes competing priorities of preservation and liberal access policies. Some within the community continue to be concerned that broad and overly-inclusive collections and interpretations have inhibited the ability of some historical societies to be advocates of meaningful history. (22) Prospective employees of historical societies will benefit from familiarizing themselves with these issues before seeking employment. But no doubt once they do, they will find that there is something for everyone within today’s historical societies.

End Notes

Additional Resources, including abstracts of some of the material cited below is available on PHRC’s Historical Society Resource page.


4. Dunlap, 53.

5. Lord, Keepers, 11, 44-47.

6. Franco, 313.


8. Franco, 310.


10. Lord, Keepers, 6; Franco, 310-311.


17. Ibid., 320.


20. Franco, 320.


22. Franco, 314; Bryan, 342.

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Sara Lawrence is working on a master's thesis on the social history of Portland, Oregon during the Progressive Era, using a local amusement park as the centerpiece. Sara has also worked at the Oregon Historical Society.