

"NEW HISTORY" IN THE COUNTRYSIDE:
MATERIAL CULTURE, LOCAL HISTORY, AND
THE ROLE OF THE RURAL LIBRARY

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In the past ten years or so, new rivulets of research interests and professional pursuits have been branching off from the mainstream of American history. Many individuals who might in 1970 have expected to be teaching history or conducting documentary research have found themselves engrossed in projects which focus primarily on materials, details, trends, and events far removed from what they or their own teachers had been used to considering. The fields of local and public history--history outside the academic arena, associated with archives, museums, and government and private agencies--are often the vehicles for these new undertakings, and rural areas are providing the setting for much of the investigative activity accompanying this kind of work.

Be it of a public or strictly academic nature, part of the explanation for these new trends in the study of history has been the increasing awareness of what artifacts, or "material culture," can tell the historical researcher. Artifacts are the unwritten

documents of culture, the results of ideas manifested in things made by human beings. Buildings, decorative objects, clothing, and tools all represent elements of cultural behavior and are coming more and more into use in aiding historians to understand how people lived, worked, dressed, and amused themselves, how they solved their perceived material needs, and what solutions they developed to the problems and puzzles of their everyday existence.

Equally important has been the popularity of historic preservation and the way it has directed research interests to older architecture. Using some of the methodology of material culture, preservationists and scholars are examining the design elements of older buildings and the technology which produced them. They are raising questions concerning the practical matters of older architecture's relative soundness and energy-efficiency over that of new buildings, as well as pursuing the more humanistic themes of the historical trends in design and the social statements which perhaps the owner or builder of the house, store, office, church, or school intended the structure to make.

In addition, a new understanding is upon us, in piecing together the social fabric of our past, of the importance of the day-to-day lives of ordinary people. Often we can best learn from the past and understand the intricacies of our present society if we can examine the social, economic, and cultural phenomena associated with people such as ourselves who happened

to have lived in previous centuries. Historians are beginning to ferret out documentary and artifactual evidence of the way our ancestors lived and to interpret these clues as part of a broader framework in reconstructing America's backgrounds.

Finally, historians are also realizing what a wealth of information exists in the countryside and in small towns about those elements which are necessary to consider in assembling that picture of the past. Urban history, rural sociology, and folklore are disciplines which are well-recognized, yet the social history of the small town is a new theatre for the scholar of material culture and local history and requires, perhaps, some more subtle methods of examination and interpretation, as well as a new assemblage of source material.

Research projects involving and influenced by the above factors may bring a new challenge to the rural librarian. The purpose of this essay is to give some examples of the kinds of research these "new" historians do and the varieties of sources they may need, so that librarians in rural areas may be forewarned about these curious kinds of undertakings.

Currently, an extremely popular type of study taking place in rural areas is "The Survey," that is, a systematic study of the older architecture in a county or other municipality. Most states have organized survey programs which are federally funded and operate at the local level. The goals of the survey are to collect information on the age, style, building materials, and

local significance of older structures in order to define those buildings which should be considered in any comprehensive plan for renewal, redevelopment, or reclamation, and to widen public awareness of the "built resources" in the landscape--their aesthetic contribution to our surroundings as well as their importance as part of the local heritage. This is a most general definition of an historic buildings survey. Often the surveys are very specific in their themes; for example, the surveyor may be pinpointing the one-room school houses in a particular area or the farm buildings of a certain type and function. The surveyor may be looking at demographic patterns in a county as reflected in the earliest houses built by, for instance, the first German or Welsh settlers. He or she may be specifically interested in industrial sites--factories, warehouses, mines. Also, the survey may have as its subject the development of commercial areas--stores and offices--in the area of study.

Another kind of research project has to do with what is known as "historic site interpretation." This is the activity which takes place at history museums and places of historical significance and involves the projection of historical accuracy to the visiting public. Research associated with such museum operations may focus on various aspects of life in the past, usually within the "interpretive period" of the museum, that is, the dates between which the site supposedly functioned most importantly in history (the interpretive period of Colonial

Williamsburg, for example, is the mid-eighteenth century). Researchers may be investigating the roles of men, women, children, servants; crafts and trades, dress, eating habits, religious and other social customs; medicine, farming, or education. They will probably be making use of rural repositories if rural life is at all pertinent to the museum's interpretive thrust.

Students and scholars of material culture, or those interested in a specific aspect of local history, may also consult rural library sources when they write papers, articles, and books. Their proposed topics may mirror those mentioned above; they may also be more theoretical or even more thorough, depending on the nature of the expected final product of their work. These researchers will probably require the same sources and services that museum personnel or surveyors will be interested in using. They will want to know what the library holdings are, perhaps to be reminded of which other local repositories they might visit, and to be steered to the proper reference tools. Because of the newness of the historical methods associated with these kinds of topics, many researchers will be rather uncertain as to the most suitable sources for their studies; on the other hand, they may know exactly what they are looking for but will probably require the librarians' assistance in locating appropriate materials, many of which may seem quite obscure. Depending on the research questions involved, such sources may be very wide-ranging indeed.

Suppose a researcher were conducting a survey of one-room school houses in a particular county. He or she has seen a few of them dotting the landscape, knows that some have been converted to houses and offices, and is interested in the trends in rural education of the area as reflected in the school buildings. Where can the study begin?

A helpful start to determine where the various schools were located might be to examine an historical atlas of the county, if one exists, supplemented by the county history, if there is one. The researcher will then need to refer to books on the history of education and of rural school architecture. Right away this may necessitate an interlibrary loan request, because many of the most useful sources on such subjects are the design books of the nineteenth century, often not among the holdings of the average library, rural or not. Any information on prevalent local building materials and the distribution of wealth and population in the county over time will be of use to the researcher in testing such hypotheses as, for instance, whether wood plank schools existed in communities less well-to-do than those where the schools were made of brick with fancy stone decoration, or when the school houses were abandoned in favor of modern consolidated complexes. The librarian might assist the researcher by directing him or her to the local school board office to track down information of this kind.

Perhaps the library has a photographic collection, or maybe the librarian knows a local resident who might allow the researcher to see his or her old photographs and who would be willing to share some reminiscences of school days "way back when." Oral sources are important in this kind of work, and the researcher will always appreciate being referred to an individual who can relate some information from personal experience. The photos may help document changes made to the structure; if they are dated, they can assist the researcher in determining when the building was used, or ceased to be used, as a school.

Both researchers and librarians need to be aware of the kinds of documents to be consulted at the county court house. Deeds, wills, and inventories may all be useful in documenting some aspect of the past which occurred at the local level. Costume research associated with a museum operation whose interpretive period is before the invention of photography provides an intriguing example.

Let us say that the staff of a "living history" museum reflecting the daily life of the late eighteenth century wishes to costume those who are acting out the roles of the people who might have lived and worked in the period and region the museum represents. Without being able to examine photographs, what other sources would be useful? Estate inventories taken of the possessions of persons who died during the interpretive period often reveal useful entries describing clothing and toilet arti-

cles. Supplementing these court records with paintings, diaries, and general works on the history of costume will bring about a much more accurate depiction of the dress of the people whose lives and habits the museum wishes to portray. Such records bring us one step closer to viewing real people in commonplace situations, illuminating the actual behavior and dress of our ancestors.

Court house records are also invaluable to individuals whose projects have to do with the history of a certain community, particularly as reflected in its architecture. In tracing the history of a house, performing a deed search is often a necessary exercise; the wise librarian will refer the researcher to the Register and Recorder's office without delay if this is the kind of project he or she is developing. Perhaps the library has some holdings having to do with the town's history--even a publication prepared for a centennial or sesquicentennial celebration of its founding. Town directories, listing the names, addresses, and occupations of local residents, are useful sources and help the researcher to identify the uses of certain buildings and the location of businesses and residences. Newspapers are a well-spring of information on community history. Newspapers may yield important material and commentary about a building or neighborhood when it was new, if it incurred disaster, or if some notable individual lived in or visited it. Advertisements for goods and services rendered at a particular business establishment afford a

better idea of the kinds of items available in the town at a certain time, how much they cost, and whether their availability represented "progress" in the community. Much of the flavor of American history is intertwined in the columns of the local press.

Clearly some of the sources the "new" historians will require will be outside the immediate realm of library holdings. Others, however, may be gathering dust in the stacks waiting for the researcher and the librarian to recognize their usefulness. Reference and circulation services in the rural library, however, are bound to take on a slightly different coloration as librarians are approached with the kinds of topics discussed here. Librarians and historians alike are on the verge of making some very enjoyable discoveries about the local history of rural areas and of furthering the development of a new approach to the study of American history.