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# A New Vision of Local History Narrative: Writing History in Cummington, Massachusetts

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A NEW VISION OF LOCAL HISTORY NARRATIVE:  
WRITING HISTORY IN CUMMINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS

A Thesis Presented

by

STEPHANIE PASTERNAK

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
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History



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WRITING HISTORY IN CUMMINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS

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## DEDICATION

To Tom, Willa and Larson

## **ABSTRACT**

A NEW VISION OF LOCAL HISTORY NARRATIVE:  
WRITING HISTORY IN CUMMINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS

SEPTEMBER 2009

STEPHANIE PASTERNAK, B.A., AMHERST COLLEGE

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Directed by: Professor Marla R. Miller

Scholars who have written about local history hold no consensus on the purpose, value, and even definition of local history narrative. This thesis seeks to move the discussion away from territorial definitions of the term local history narrative and provide a framework for thinking about the field. It argues for a broad interpretation of United States local history narrative and proposes the field of local history be integrated into the academic history curriculum. Drawing on a variety of local history scholarship, the thesis first delineates the development of local history writing from the early colonial narratives, through the nineteenth-century heyday of amateur history writing, across the complicated relationship between amateur and professional history during the twentieth century, to the current spectrum of writings that include those which defy the traditional distinction between amateur and professional history. Turning next to the reflective scholarship of local history, the essay discusses issues that arise in the practice of local history such as community pressure to censor work and the challenges of sharing authority. Finally, this thesis provides a working draft of public local history narrative in a chapter investigating a suffrage convention attended by Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe held in 1881 in Cummington, Massachusetts, a small remote hilltown in the foothills of the Berkshires. The narrative

traces the story of Henrietta Nahmer, a separated mother of two, who employed multiple tools when organizing for the cause of suffrage in a community that on the whole offered little support. Henrietta Nahmer's story offers a case study of suffrage activity on the grass-roots level and invites questions of agency in the context of the organizational strategies of the suffrage leadership. Seeking to provide a history that engages a nonacademic local audience while exploring historical questions, this story of Henrietta Nahmer and the suffrage movement in Cummington demonstrates the challenges and opportunities of contemporary local history narrative.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### **Rationale**

At the time I was entering the Public History program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst I was invited to write a series of essays on the local history of the town of Cummington, Massachusetts. Coincidentally and concurrently the University of Massachusetts graduate program in history began the process of establishing a narrative nonfiction track. In light of this, I decided to write some of my Cummington essays as a Master's thesis. Thus the focus of the thesis became local history *written narrative*.

Because the history department does not have a local history course or program, my advisor Marla Miller advised I undertake an independent study on local history in order to gain an understanding of the scholarship pertaining to the theory, history, and practice of writing local history narrative. The first chapters of this thesis introducing local history grew out of that independent study.

While at first it seemed an introduction to writing local history would entail a straightforward summary of the limited existing literature on local history, it soon became clear that the scholars who wrote about local history (who as often as not did not specialize in local history) held no consensus on the purpose, value, and even definition of local history narrative. Some scholars considered local history to be narratives written by amateurs about their local communities; others appropriated the term to refer to highly academic narratives. In keeping with the few scholars who have tried to reconcile the two perspectives, this thesis seeks to move the discussion away from territorial definitions of the term local history and provide a framework for thinking about the field.<sup>1</sup> Thus in Chapter Two I call for a broad definition of United States

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<sup>1</sup> For these different perspectives, see the following: Carol Kammen, *On Doing Local History: Reflections on What Historians Do, Why, and What it Means* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2003); Robert

local history narrative and propose the field of local history be integrated into the academic history curriculum.

In order to provide an overview of the current landscape of local history narrative, Chapter Three traces the development of local history writing from the early narratives in colonial Anglo-America through its maturation during the nineteenth-century heyday of amateur history writing. It continues across the complicated relationship between amateur and professional history during the twentieth century, to the current spectrum that includes writings that blur the distinctions between popular and academic, and amateur and professional.

Because writing public local history requires that the historian work within the local community, Chapter Four considers issues raised in the small but growing reflective scholarship of local history practice. From pressure to censor content to questions of sharing authority with community members, local historians must navigate the complex terrain of writing history for and with the public.

Finally, Chapter Five is a draft, by way of example, of writing local history narrative. Centering on a suffrage convention held in Cummington in 1881, the essay follows the life of one of its principal organizers, Cummington native Henrietta S. Nahmer, in an effort to unravel the circumstances that led to the blockbuster event in the small remote town. Written for the local community, the narrative seeks to balance the standards of academia with the requirements of engaging a local audience.

In each chapter, this thesis illustrates the continued and varied intersections between academic and local history. Thus, as a whole, this paper provides a rationale for the general inclusion of the practice of writing local history narrative into the academic history curriculum.

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Dykstra and William Silag, "Doing Local History: Monographic Approaches to the Smaller Community," *American Quarterly* 37 (1985), 411-425; Terry Barnhart, "Of Whole and Parts: Local History and the American Experience," (accessed 2 August 2009), available from <http://www.eiu.edu/~localite/journal/2000/Americanlocal.pdf>.

Specifically, it is my hope that the writing of local history narrative can be incorporated jointly into the nonfiction narrative track and the public history program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

### **A Local History Project in Cummington**

As stated above, this thesis developed as part of a local history book project in the town of Cummington, Massachusetts. The following is the story behind that book project and therefore, behind this thesis.

#### Seduced by Local History

Like many newcomers to long established towns, I first became interested in the local history of my town of Cummington by learning about the past of my own property where I moved to in 1999. Our house had once been the center of an historic now defunct art colony, the Cummington School of the Arts, established in 1923 by Katherine Frazier. With a focus on music and drama, over the years the school was attended by its share of famous artists including Helen Frankenthaler, William De Kooning, and Diane Arbus. In the 1930s, Frazier's friend Harry Duncan started the Cummington Press, a pioneering small press that published original works of Marianne Moore, Robert Lowell, Wallace Stevens, and Allan Tate among others. For some years the press was situated in my living room, where some of these same poets congregated. One award winning book designer for the press was Jewish German refugee Gustav Wolf. I soon discovered that a scene of Wolf and the press in my living room appeared in a 1944 film called *The Cummington Story*, a fictional documentary produced by the U.S Department of Office of War Information about Cummington's hostel for European refugees during World War II. As a former teacher of refugees and immigrants, I wanted to know the story behind this sanctuary and the 44 western Europeans who found refuge there.

My home's years as a farmhouse were also intriguing. There the town's second minister, Roswell Hawks, expanded his family and prospered personally from 1824 until 1833 when he left Cummington to help Mary Lyons create Mount Holyoke seminary (later Mount Holyoke College) where Hawks served as president of the Board of Trustees for nearly thirty years. By contrast, it seemed only bad luck came to 1840s occupant Dyer Tower. While he lived on the property several children and his wife died. Two decades later, the resident Hunt brothers held a double wedding the day before they set off to fight in the Civil War.

Later, when serving as a Scholar in Residence at the Trustees of the Reservations' William Cullen Bryant Homestead, I became intrigued by the history of farming in town as well as the stories of the "other" Bryants. William Cullen Bryant's brothers struggled to make a living on the family farm and were integrally involved in the everyday fabric of Cummington life until they gave up and emigrated to Illinois in the 1830s.

Other stories I found in Cummington's local history volume *Only One Cummington* intrigued me as well. I was surprised that there had been an academy for advanced education in Cummington in the 1790s. I wondered about the story behind the 1854 excommunication of seven people from the Congregational church for their antislavery beliefs as well as the origins of an 1881 suffrage convention in Cummington attended by the famous suffragists Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe.

Each of these stories (and the many more not mentioned here) merits a more thorough telling in its own right — the world always has a place for stories of individual struggle which sometimes end in tragedy, other times in triumph. These stories also serve as a link to the past of the landscapes we in Cummington inhabit daily. It takes just a modest bit of research to unearth enough information about these past lives to tantalize a researcher, although it is usually difficult to find enough information to satiate his or her curiosity.

In Cummington it is easier than in many places to find out basic information about the circumstances of peoples lives because of two works of local history published in the 1970s. *Only One Cummington* (1974) consists of both a general history of the town and a remarkably comprehensive property history of every lot in town, complete with photos, owner names and dates. *The Vital Records of Cummington* (1979) includes birth, marriage, death, and census records for Cummington residents from 1762 to 1900.<sup>2</sup>

Both of these Cummington histories were written and/or compiled by historian Bill Streeter (b. 1932), a Cummington native. I met Bill Streeter soon after I had joined the local historical commission in 2001. Streeter and I both felt that much more needed to be written about Cummington history. For years, he had been preparing for a second volume of Cummington history, collecting information in his own personal files that included any relevant article ever published in the *Hampshire Gazette*. Bill Streeter was particularly interested in documenting the myriad of economic enterprise that existed in Cummington from the forgotten potash industry to the once famous tanning industry.

## The Project: Only One Cummington, Volume II

At some point in 2002 Bill Streeter and I agreed to collaborate on a book project together. Streeter's section was to be a chronology of Cummington's past from its settlement to the present, selecting topical events from each year with entries as diverse as the whetstone industry, tornados, flu epidemics and political events. Mine was to be a set of essays elaborating on particularly compelling aspects of Cummington's social and cultural history (such as the

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<sup>2</sup> Helen H. Foster and William W. Streeter, *Only One Cummington* (Cummington, Massachusetts: Cummington Historical Commission, 1974); William W. Streeter and Daphne H. Morris, ed. *The Vital Records of Cummington, Massachusetts 1762-1900* (Cummington, Massachusetts: Cummington Historical Commission, 1979).

antislavery movement) that we felt deserved a more thorough examination. We decided we would call it *Only One Cummington, Volume 2*, and henceforth referred to it as OOC2.

Bill Streeter suggested that the Cummington Historical Commission fund the project including editing, proofreading, and hardbound printing. We submitted a proposal to the commission for \$80,000 to fund the project. If anyone but Bill Streeter had ever proposed this project for such a large amount of money it would never have been considered. But Streeter was arguably the most influential person in the history of the Cummington Historical Commission, having founded that body in the early 1970s. In addition to being responsible for the two town histories, he was also the principal creator of the town museum, The Kingman Tavern Museum, and was the lead architect of its endowment, which today approaches a million dollars. Most of his accomplishments were achieved through manual labor, an incredible power of persuasion, New England frugality, and sheer will. A descendant of one of the first settlers in Cummington, Streeter grew up on a working dairy farm that still boasts the oldest (barely) standing barn in town. While during his younger years in Cummington he was somewhat of a progressive maverick, reviled by some and loved by others, in his golden years he has pretty much assumed the mantle of eminent Cummington historian, even though he moved out of town a good thirty years ago. I soon found that as an outsider historian, working with Streeter- the ultimate insider- was like gold currency. If I was to do a local history, I had a powerful ally. With myself recused, the Commission agreed to sponsor the book.

Streeter, who had been a part of Cummington politics as a public servant and private citizen over the years, was very aware of the political nature of writing a town history. Therefore, he wanted to ensure that we maintained authorial independence. By contrast, I wanted to find a way to include community input in the book. We designed a survey that fulfilled both purposes. It provided a chance *in advance* for people to voice their opinions as to what should be included in the book. While we may or may not take their advice, we would be aware in advance of

expectations *and* people could not complain that they had never had a say. At the same time, we were including members of the Cummington community into the process of creating the book.

The project has taken longer than expected and has changed. Bill Streeter experienced many setbacks to his health resulting in his hiring a co-writer/editor, nearly full-time for over a year, to help complete his part of the book. This added an expense of about \$50,000 but fortunately, the commission felt it was worth the price.

For myself, after I agreed to work on the book in 2002 I added two children to my family. My responsibilities — new motherhood, graduate school, and the need to work part time — forced me to set the book on the back burner to simmer. I slowly did research but not at the pace I had hoped. By 2008 Bill Streeter was ready to publish and worried that he would not live to see publication. However, I was not ready. I made the ultimate decision that we should go ahead and publish his part of the book. I would publish mine later in a less expensive form. Meanwhile I would help shepherd his book through the publication process. (During that process Bill Streeter did spend weeks in the hospital between cancer treatments and an aortic aneurism. Fortunately with the coordination between his editor, myself, and the publisher, all went smoothly.) As of this writing, his 600+ page tome was recently delivered. Streeter recovered and has attended several book signings sponsored by the Historical Commission.

Now that my children are school-aged, I am able to focus on finishing the essays I started. I plan to publish them at a local printer in an economical format akin to some of the Northampton books published for the town's 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I am grateful to Bill Streeter for lending both his support and resources towards this project. I could not have accomplished what I have without his fully sharing his knowledge and access to Cummington records.

## The Essays

Initially, I had intended to write five essays that would expand on five social and cultural movements in Cummington history in chronological order: the early academy and lyceum (1795–1840); the abolition movement (1832–1860); suffrage activism (1880–1897); the establishment of the Greenwood Music Camp, the Cummington School of the Arts and Meadowbrook Jewish family camp (1910–1940); and the Cummington Refugee hostel (1941–1944).

I selected these topics for several reasons. First, I found them inherently interesting. Together they spoke to the question of why a small remote town would concern itself with the politics and culture of the nation. In addition, I believed the topics would appeal to a broad community in Cummington and surrounding towns. While in their own time these issues (antislavery and suffrage) and institutions (academy of higher learning, refugee hostel, school of the arts) were points of conflict or skepticism, in the warm glow of hindsight and a shifting culture, they were now chapters to be proud of. For example, whereas during World War II German-speaking refugees were viewed with suspicion by many in town, these days the story of the Cummington refugee hostel is a point of pride. Furthermore, the stories I was going to tell were largely undiscovered and unknown apart from the basic details.

Still, I felt a vague concern that the essays mainly told the story of Cummington's cultural and intellectual elite. My fears were articulated one day when at the local community café, the Creamery, I ran into a neighbor, Cliff Thayer, who is a sheep farmer from an old Cummington family. When in conversation I told him what I planned to include in the book, he said, "Don't forget about us farmers."

Cliff Thayer's words resonated with me. I had recently written a report on early twentieth-century dairy farming at the Bryant Homestead as a Scholar-in-Residence and viewed early twentieth century dairying as significant in Cummington history. I could replace the essay



on the Cummington School of the Arts with one on farming. Yet I did not have a compelling story of an individual farmer. In the other essays I had identified characters central to the topics who served as vehicles to carry the story forward. One possibility is to write about the Thayer farm, located next to the Cummington School of the Arts. That would allow me to write about both the farmers and the artists in the first half of the twentieth century and explore the interaction between those very different worlds. I trust the story will emerge as I set my sights on that piece of writing, because there always is a story.

### **Beyond the Thesis**

It is fitting that this thesis concentrates in large part on the scholarship of local history. When I first embarked on writing about Cummington's past I knew little about Cummington and even less about the field of local history. Delving into the issues, debates and history embodied in the scholarship of local history has enabled me to become a more reflective practitioner of the public local history I am writing.

While it had been my original intention to incorporate all five essays as the heart of this thesis, I soon discovered that such a project far exceeded the scope of a Master's writing project. As of this writing, I have drafted chapters on education, abolition, the refugee hostel as well as the suffrage convention, which is included here. I intend to finish those essays and to continue to research, write, and explore the local history of Cummington and elsewhere.

## CHAPTER 2

### DEFINING LOCAL HISTORY

#### **The Definition of Local History**

The term “local history” is not as simple as it might first appear. Conventionally, local histories have been thought of as writings about a town, region or state written by an amateur writer for a local audience. Since the late nineteenth century professionalization of history, many accredited historians have held amateur local historians and their writings in disdain and have not considered them to be part of the profession. In contrast, in the last decades of the twentieth century, some academics appropriated the term local history to refer to community studies — highly academic monographs that explore questions about a particular community.<sup>3</sup> More recently historians like Terry Barnhart broadened the parameters of local history to include the work of historical geographers and anthropologists as well as case studies of national, regional or community history. He writes, “Local history is a big tent — the demographic province of both amateurs and professionals — and local historians are as diverse as their audiences.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet even Barnhart criticized the amateur historians for their “inordinate preoccupation with pioneers and first families,” though he does acknowledge some of these early scholars were

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in Robert Dykstra and William Silag, “Doing Local History: Monographic Approaches to the Smaller Community,” *American Quarterly* 37 (1985), 411-425, the authors refer to as local history community studies including: Philip J. Greven, *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970) and Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736*, (New York: Norton and Co., 1970).

<sup>4</sup> Terry A. Barnhart, forward to *On Doing Local History: Reflections on What Historians Do, Why, and What it Means* by Carol Kammen (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2003), ix.

skilled.<sup>5</sup> Some of the principal scholars of local history hold a similarly conflicted view of conventional amateur local histories. While wanting to support and acknowledge the value of amateur historians, they also upbraid them for not adhering to basic standards of historical inquiry. For example, while Carol Kammen's *On Doing Local History* gives a sympathetic overview to the past of local history, in the end her book is prescriptive, providing guidelines to help amateurs write local history that looks more like academic history. This is evident in her definition of local history, which is simple at first, — “the study of past events, or of people or groups, in a given geographic area,” — but then she continues with how she thinks local history ought to be done:

[local history is] a study based on a wide variety of documentary evidence and placed in a comparative context that should be both regional and national. Such study ought to be accomplished by a historian using methods appropriate to the topic under consideration while following general rules of historical inquiry: open-mindedness, honesty, accountability, and accuracy.<sup>6</sup>

Kammen's *On Doing Local history*, along with her *Encyclopedia of Local History*, are useful resources for amateur historians seeking help in writing their narratives.<sup>7</sup> However, implicit in this desire to help amateur local historians write more contextually as professional historians do, is the assumption that the way many amateurs have been writing is inferior. The hope is that if more local historians write better local history, the entire reputation of the profession will improve as well. It will begin to edge the local historian away from the negative stereotype of the “old lady in tennis shoes.”

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<sup>5</sup> Terry Barnhart, “Of Whole and Parts: Local History and the American Experience,” *Research and Review Series*, 7 (2000), 10 (accessed 2 August 2009), available from <http://www.eiu.edu/~localite/journal/2000/Americanlocal.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Kammen, *On Doing*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Carol Kammen and Norma Prendergast, *Encyclopedia of Local History*, (Lanman, Maryland: Rowman, AltaMira, 2000).

On the other hand, British historian William D. Rubenstein believes such a view tends to exclude from academic history a variety of amateur writings that are valued by much of the population and that, viewed critically, can enhance an understanding of a community. Furthermore, he asserts amateur and professional historians share basic methodologies: both weigh evidence and follow methods to do their research. Acknowledging that the perspective of the local historian is often less complex and more sanguine than that of the academic historian, Rubenstein argues the writings of the nonacademic historian offer the academic historian both important information and insight into the past. Suggesting professional historians can learn from their amateur counterparts, Rubenstein writes, “it would do the academic historian no harm at all to become better acquainted with this vast world of which, too often, he or she knows too little.”<sup>8</sup>

In keeping with this view, I call for a formal definition of an academic field of local history that expands the boundaries of local history to include a variety of academic and nonacademic local history narratives. Like public history or political history, local history is a concept. It can be thought of as a narrative or genre trope that assumes a referent to a place nearby.<sup>9</sup> This geographical place varies with each book and each author. It can be a multi-state region, a street, a neighborhood, a town, a body of water, or a piece of the landscape. The focus of the local history can be the place itself, the people who lived there or events that took place in a particular location. The study of local history narrative brings together writings about the past, amateur and academic, that share a relationship to a place. There is no other academic category

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<sup>8</sup>William D. Rubenstein, “History and ‘amateur’ history” in Peter Lambert and Phillipp Schofield ed., *Making History: An Introduction to the History and Practices of a Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2004), 272-278.

<sup>9</sup> In his syllabus on local history methodology, professor Michael Gordon contrasts definitions of local history. He writes, “For some, the geographical is concrete, as it is for Carol Kammen who sees local history as “the study of past events, or of people or groups, in a given geographic area.” Kammen, *On Doing Local History*, 4. For Thomas Bender community is more abstract, defined as an experience of social memory with a place as referent rather than a concrete place itself.” Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1978.)

that puts these writings in one place together.<sup>10</sup> The collected writings about the past of a place constitute the local history narrative tradition.

Local history incorporates an array of research methodologies and is expressed in a variety of narrative styles. The narratives can be what I term conventional local histories, written in the traditional format of the nineteenth century, such as Frances Caulkins' *History of Norwich* (1845), Hiram Barrus' *History of the Town of Goshen, Hampshire County, Massachusetts* (1881), or David Wood's *Lenox, Massachusetts: Shire Town* (1969).<sup>11</sup> They can be local historians' collected and edited oral histories about a place such as Joe Manning's *Steeple: Sketches of North Adams* (1998) or a set of academic but accessible histories about place such as *Cultivating a Past: Essays on the History of Hadley* (2009).<sup>12</sup> Some reflective local histories such as T.H. Breen's *Imagining the Past: East Hampton Histories* (1989) are as much about the process of researching the history as they are about the place. Other histories of place, what I term metanarratives of local history, such as Cathy Stanton's *The Lowell Experiment: public history in a post-industrial city*, focus more on deconstructing how a place is remembered than on the history of a place itself.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In Rubenstein, "History," 276, William Rubenstein notes, "indeed journals of local and institutions historical societies are among the only places where the work of academic and nonacademic historians coexist, happily or not."

<sup>11</sup> Frances Manwaring Caulkins, *History of Norwich, Connecticut: From its Possession by the Indians, to the year 1866* (Hartford, Conn: Case, Lockwood and Co. 1866); Hiram Barrus, *History of the Town of Goshen, Hampshire County, Massachusetts, First Settlement in 1761 to 1881, with Family Sketches* (Boston: 1881); David Wood *Lenox, Massachusetts: Shire Town* (Lenox, Massachusetts: Town of Lenox, 1969).

<sup>12</sup> Joe Manning, *Steeple: Sketches of North Adams* (Florence, Mass.: Flatiron Press, 1998); Marla R. Miller, ed., *Cultivating a Past: Essays on the History of Hadley, Massachusetts* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> T.H. Breen, *Imagining the Past: East Hampton Histories* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1989); Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell experiment: public history in a postindustrial city* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006).

The local history tent would also include early chronicles of exploration and settlement such as Antonio Espejo's "Journey to the Provinces and Settlements of New Mexico or the Early Promotional Writings of Settlers in the New World, 1583."<sup>14</sup> Accounts of early European exploration and settlement (like the missions in the southwest) are often the only recorded memories of a place from an earlier time. In these regions, amateur local histories written in the Anglo-American tradition may not have appeared until the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. This broader view would allow for a nuanced regional analysis of the development of local history narrative traditions, perhaps revealing vernacular forms.

Local history may share a space with many academic fields including ethnic studies, case-studies of national history, public history, regional history, urban history, the many place specific histories (e.g. New England history), environmental history, oral history, and microhistory. Local history as I conceive it does not have to be termed local history by the author to be considered local history. In fact, as Barnhart noted, many historians writing local history avoid the term:

Academic historians who research and write local history sometimes seem defensive about its purposes and claims to attention. In some instances, they even abandoned the conventional state and local history labels in preference for the presumably more comprehensive and useful shibboleths of regional studies, community studies, urban history...even the all encompassing "public history." But it may be said that state and local history needs no repackaging, embellishment, or apologies. The themes, topics, concepts, methods, and sources of state and local history are broad enough to include all catchwords and angles of vision, as is manifestly apparent from the richness of the existing literature. As Myron Marty has observed, "local history done under other rubrics...is still local history."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Antonio Espejo, "Account of the Journey to the Provinces and Settlements of New Mexico or the Early Promotional Writings of Settlers in the New World, 1583," in Herbert Eugene Bolton, ed., *Spanish Exploration in the Southwest 1542-1706* (New York: Scribner, 1916), 168-192.

<sup>15</sup> Barnhart, "Of Wholes and Parts," 17.

However, some academics enthusiastically embrace the term. Michael Lewis, an environmental historian at Salisbury University in Maryland, finds local history and environmental history dovetail in a mutually beneficial way:

While colleagues at your university and mine might complain that their historical sub-field cannot be studied through local history, all environmental historians live and teach in a landscape reflecting biological, geological, and human histories. We are fortunate that the methods of environmental history are, literally, grounded and oriented toward local case studies reflecting larger cultural trends or natural situations (culture and nature, of course, used advisedly)... we have no excuse other than time and our lack of knowledge for not incorporating local history into our environmental history courses.<sup>16</sup>

Local history narratives are created by a wide range of people for a myriad of purposes. Some are written by academics for other academics or for the public at large, while others are written by amateurs for their local communities. Some are written with the purpose to engage local audiences, what one might call public local history, while others are written to test a historical theory in language that is largely inaccessible to the general public. Together the collected writings provide multiple perspectives on a place that a historian can consider with a nuanced view.

### **The Value of Local History to Professional Historians**

Incorporating local history into an academic history department benefits many, including professors, students, their colleges and universities, as well as members of surrounding communities. Practicing local history allows historians to reach a wider audience beyond their students and colleagues. As some professional historians have long understood, local history

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Lewis, "Reflections: 'This Class Will Write a Book': An Experiment in Environmental History Pedagogy," *Environmental History* 7 (2004), 604-5. While certainly other environmental historians (such as David Glassberg at the University of Massachusetts) also incorporate local history into their studies and create narrative case studies that can also be thought of as local history, Lewis is one of the few to write about the connection between environmental case study and local history.

narrative is extremely popular with ordinary people, far more popular than most monographs.

Louis Mumford explained in his 1927 essay "The Value of Local History" that local history is attractive because it is about *us*:

All of us feel, at bottom, with Walt Whitman, that there is no sweeter meat than that which clings to our own bones. It is this conviction that gives value to local history; we feel that our own lives, the lives of our ancestors and neighbors, that events that have taken place in the particular locality where we have settled, are every bit as important as the lives of people who are more remote from us...<sup>17</sup>

David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig affirmed this view in their 1998 book *Presence of the Past*. In their survey of 808 Americans they found that many people looked to the past to define their personal identity, connect with others who have a similar experience, and to leave a legacy of their own lives for future generations to learn from.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the historiography of amateur local history can provide historians with valuable insight into a community that they may not find elsewhere. This body of writing about place by amateur historians can provide an important historiographical base for academic studies of a community. As William D. Rubenstein noted, while many professional historians (often social historians) have criticized the bulk of amateur local history for both its lack of analysis and omission of unsavory topics, "local historiography does provide in most cases a firm and valuable basis for more sophisticated histories which should, perhaps, be better known to today's graduate students and researchers whose iconoclasm and search for conflict based in socio-economic factors may have gone too far in the other direction."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Louis Mumford, "The Value of Local History," in *The Pursuit of Local History: Readings on Theory and Practice*, ed. Carol Kammen (Walnut Creek, Ca.: AltaMira Press, 1996), 86-87.

<sup>18</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> Rubenstein. "History," 276.



Even factually inaccurate local histories can be beneficial to historical research. Drawing on perspectives proffered by historians David Lowenthal in *The Past is a Foreign Country* and Alessandro Portelli in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, the historian can read local history narratives not only for facts included but also with an eye to omissions. These lacunae may point to the mentality or cultural truths of the writers themselves, which might enrich an understanding of the community.<sup>20</sup>

As most universities that house regional studies, local history or public history programs recognize, such programs can provide a direct link between a history department and members of the surrounding community. Environmental historian Michael Lewis writes of the benefits of his students' agricultural study of Wicomico County, Maryland where Salisbury University is located:

Local community members and organizations, from members of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation to local fishermen and farmers, have read parts or all of the students' work. The recently completed 2004 class report on agricultural change in Wicomico County over the last 120 years ("Eating Delmarva: Agricultural Transformations in Wicomico County, 1880-Present") will be distributed by the university's public affairs outreach organization to local business and political leaders, so that they can better understand the changing role of agriculture — environmentally, socially, and economically — in this area. The students' research is public history, and it is transforming their local community.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990). For more on cultural truths, see Sally J. Southwick, *Building on a Borrowed Past: Place and Identity in Pipestone, Minnesota* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, "Reflections," 617.

For institutions that stand on tax-free properties, and especially land-grant universities that have a mission to serve the community, local history projects provide a way an institution can contribute.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, hands-on local history research is an invaluable tool that teaches students the intricacies of historical methods. Michael Lewis found that having students do original research in local history case studies to learn environmental history provided students a deeper understanding of the field than did his usual lecture course on environmental history. In addition, the live laboratory required and motivated students to improve their basic skills of reading, writing and critical thinking more than a survey course would.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, by doing local history professional historians can improve their practice by getting to know the community they are studying in a way an outsider cannot. Citing the exemplary local history writing of Joseph Amato and his colleagues at the Center for Rural and Regional Studies at Southwest Minnesota State University, historian David Danborn wrote,

I am also coming to believe that professional historians can do better histories of the places where they live than they can of places where they do not live. Not only do professional historians have the sort of sustained contact with and immersion in the sources that outsiders lack, but they also know the community and its culture in a way outsiders cannot.<sup>24</sup>

Even when there is a Public History program already established, a course in Local History can enrich the public history experience. Historian Michael Gordon wrote in the introduction of 2007 syllabus for his course “Research Methods in Local History”:

[public history students] share a common ground with other public historians in the

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<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the University of Massachusetts History Department engages in many local history projects through its Public History program. See Marla R. Miller, “Playing to Strength: Teaching Public History at the Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *American Studies International* 42 (2004), 174-212.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, “Reflections,” 615-616.

<sup>24</sup> David Danborn, “Historical Musings: ‘Cast Down your Bucket Where you Are’: Professional Historians and Local History,” *South Dakota History* 33 (2003), 272.

United States: all eventually conduct research in local history using a variety of primary and secondary sources. For this reason, public history students should know how to study the history of different localities, including frontier towns, 19th and 20th century urban immigrant neighborhoods, rural areas, small cities and towns, and suburban communities. They must also learn the methodologies and sources that can be used for studying these localities. This course is intended to help meet these needs.<sup>25</sup>

Incorporating coursework in reading and writing local history narrative brings value to any history department. Local history is a flexible form. It can be integrated as a field of inquiry or even as a single course. It can be an academic field on its own or it can be subsumed into a variety of subfields within an academic history department including History, Public History, Regional Studies, and Writing Nonfiction Narrative History. By incorporating a local history program, a history department can add value to the department, the university and the surrounding community.

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<sup>25</sup> Syllabus for Michael Gordon's class "Research Methods in Local History" taught at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, History 715, Spring 2007, (accessed April 18, 2009), available from <http://www.uwm.edu/Course/448-715/syllabus.html>.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE PAST OF LOCAL HISTORY

#### The Historiography of Local History

While local history has never been a popular subject of study among American historians, over the years many scholars have considered different aspects of United States local history. Early surveys of local history date as far back as the mid-nineteenth century with Herman Ernst Ludewig's 1846 bibliography *Literature of American Local History*.<sup>26</sup> During the early decades of the twentieth century a few scholars took interest in local history as practiced by academics. For example, Constance McLaughlin wrote about the value of local history in the context of academic history while John Caughey cautioned against the narrow view of the amateur historian.<sup>27</sup> Mid-twentieth century historians George Callcott and David Van Tassell focused their studies on amateur history written in the nineteenth century, considered by some to be the "heyday" of local history.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s the increase in amateur local history stimulated by the United States Bicentennial as well as the advent of academic community studies inspired by the new social history were accompanied by an increase in both amateur and academic local history

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<sup>26</sup> H.E. Ludewig, *Literature of American Local History: A Bibliographical Essay* (New York: R. Craighead, 1846) cited in Terry Barnhart "Introduction," in Carol Kammen *On Doing Local History: Reflections on What Local Historians Do, Why and What It Means*, 2d ed. (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2003), x.

<sup>27</sup> Constance McLaughlin Green, "The Value of Local History," in *The Cultural Approach to History: Edited for the American Historical Association*, ed. Carol Ware (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 275-286; John Walton Caughey, "The Local Historian: His Occupational Hazards and Compensations," *Pacific Historical Review* 12 (March, 1943), 1-9.

<sup>28</sup> George H. Callcott, *History in the United States 1800-1860: Its Practice and Purpose* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970); George H. Callcott, "Historians in Early Nineteenth-Century America," *The New England Quarterly* 32 (1959), 496-520; David D. Van Tassell, *Recording America's Past: An Interpretation of the Development of Historical Studies in America, 1607-1884* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

writing. Scholars such as Larry Tise (and more recently Ian Tyrrell) examined the relationship between amateur and professional history in the context of the development of state and local historical societies and associations.<sup>29</sup> David Russo chronicled the history of Anglo-American town histories and warned against the intrusion of academics into the field while David Kyvig's and Marty Myron's *Nearby History* and Carol Kammen's *On Doing Local History* entreated amateur historians to employ basic academic standards.<sup>30</sup>

In 1996 Kammen published a set of essays by academics about local history underscoring the validity of the field within academic history.<sup>31</sup> More recently, while Thomas Bender expressed concern about the lack of synthesis resulting from the emphasis on localized studies, Terry Barnhart and Richard D Brown argued that local history and microhistory support a national synthesis.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, because the evolution of the local history narrative is inextricably linked to the development of professional history in the United States, historians such as Peter Novick, John Higham and Ellen Fitzpatrick incorporated local history as a subtopic in works exploring the history of professional scholarship.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Larry E. Tise, "State and Local History: A Future From the Past," *The Public Historian* 1 (1979), 14-22; Ian Tyrrell, "Public at the Creation: Place, Memory, and Historical Practice in the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, 1907-1950," *Journal of American History* 94 (2007), 19-46.

<sup>30</sup> David Russo, *Keepers of Our Past: Local Historical Writing in the United States, 1820s-1930s* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1988); David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You*, (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982); Carol Kammen, *On Doing*.

<sup>31</sup> Carol Kammen, ed., *The Pursuit of Local History: Readings on Theory and Practice* (Walnut Creek, California: Altamira, 1995).

<sup>32</sup>, Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History* 73 (1986), 120-36; Terry Barnhart, "Of Whole and Parts: Local History and the American Experience," *Research and Review Series* 7 (2000), 10 (accessed 2 August 2009), available from <http://www.eiu.edu/~localite/journal/2000/Americanlocal.pdf>; Richard D. Brown, "Microhistory and the Post-modern Challenge," *Journal of the Early Republic* 23 (2003), 1-20.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Ellen Fitzpatrick, *History's Memory: Writing America's*

Drawing on this historiography, the following history, which traces the development of the Anglo-American local history narrative, provides a backdrop for the local history narrative I am practicing in Massachusetts today.

## **A History of Local History**

### British Colonial Local History Accounts

Most scholars begin their discussions of Anglo-American local history with the early writings by British settlers. These are primarily personal accounts of early settlement experiences and were often written for promotional purposes.<sup>34</sup> The first published local narrative in the British colonies was by a Virginian: Captain John Smith's 1608 letter *A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Noate as Hath Hapned in Virginia since the First Planting of that Collony*.<sup>35</sup> The first formal history of Massachusetts's settlement was William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, a personal account of the founding of the colony (written in 1630 but first published in 1856).<sup>36</sup>

Local history writing expanded in the eighteenth century. As the British colonies matured in the early to mid-eighteenth century, writers scribed political histories detailing the development of individual colonies. Because the colonies had distinct identities, rather than writing about the British colonies as a whole, these local history writings focused on events

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*Past, 1880–1980* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); John Higham *Professional Scholarship in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

<sup>34</sup> Russo, *Keepers*, 9. Also see David D. Van Tassell, *Recording America's Past*.

<sup>35</sup> John Smith, "A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Noate as Hath Hapned in Virginia since the first Planting of that Collony," (London, 1608) in *Captain John Smith: A Select Edition of His Writings*, ed. Karen Ordahl Kupperman (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

<sup>36</sup> William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation, 1606-1646*, ed. William T. Davis (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908).

within a particular colony or region or town within the colony. For example, John Lawson wrote the *History of Carolina* in 1709.<sup>37</sup>

Encounters with Native Americans (mostly in the form of captivity narratives) were another popular topic of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century narratives. Colonists throughout the British colonies had equally terrible conflicts with the Native Americans. However, though only New Englanders avidly wrote and published accounts of their struggles in the King Philip's War in New England such as Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682) and John Williams' *The Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion* (1707).<sup>38</sup>

None of these early British colonial writings were histories as history is considered today. These early colonial accounts were either chiefly personal accounts or a listing of past events written mostly by men of high office, often-college educated clergymen. Even the political histories that were more common in the eighteenth century were still largely personal accounts or compilations of facts.<sup>39</sup>

Historians have tried to explain why New England colonists wrote more narratives than people from other regions did. Edmund Morgan cites the importance of the sense of divine mission in Puritan New England: "the founders of New England were so filled with a sense of

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<sup>37</sup> John Lawson, *The History of Carolina, Containing the Exact Description and Natural History of that Country : Together with the Present State Thereof. And a Journal of a Thousand Miles, Travel'd Thro' Several Nations of Indians; Giving a Particular Account of their Customs, Manners, &c.* (London: W. Taylor and J. Baker, 1714) cited in Frederick B. Tolles, "The Historians of the Middle Colonies" in *The Reinterpretation of Early American History: Essays in Honor of John Allen Pomfret* ed. Ray Allen Billington (San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 1966), 65-79.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Rowlandson, *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682) and John Williams, *The Redeemed Captive, Returning to Zion: A Faithful History of Remarkable Occurrences, in the Captivity and Deliverance of Mr. John Williams* (Boston: B.Green, 1707) in *The Oxford Handbook of Early American Literature*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Russo, *Keepers*, 10.

their own historic mission that they were writing the history of their settlement even before they set foot in the New World.”<sup>40</sup>

## History Writing after the Revolution

After the American Revolution, both the demand for and the production of local history expanded, reaching its zenith during the 1870s and 1880s. The reason for its popularity can only be understood in the context of events in American history, culture, and the printing industry.

During the early decades of the new republic reading became a valued activity in American society. Historian Robert Ferguson notes that voracious reading by Revolutionary Americans was a reflection of the late eighteenth century enlightenment values of knowledge and education as a form of self-improvement. In addition, it was believed that a viable republican form of government (as opposed to a corrupt dictatorial monarchy like in England) required an educated citizenry. This led to the expansion of education for both boys and girls and widespread increase in literacy in the years between the Revolution and the Civil War (first in the north and middle states, later in the south). As William Gilmore has pointed out, by 1790 even Americans living in the rural backcountry of northern New England had access to the mass culture of print communication. History in particular was in demand. John Higham noted that history “superceded the study of the classics as the chief vehicle for enabling man to know himself.” With a thirst for history about their new nation, Americans demanded popular history.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Edward S. Morgan, “Historians of Early New England,” in Billington, *The Reinterpretation*, 43.

<sup>41</sup> Robert A. Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment, 1750-1820* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 4; Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 125-130; William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes A Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); John Higham, “Writing American History,” (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970) in *The Pursuit*, ed. Carol Kammen, 17; See also David Jaffee, “The Village Enlightenment in New England, 1760-1820,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 47 (1990), 327-346.



Improvements in printing technology made more books available for the voracious public. Historian Charlotte Morgan has observed that over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century, improvements in book production technologies enabled an unprecedented mass production of books. In the early nineteenth century wooden presses were replaced by iron increasing printing capacity. Later in the century, power presses enabled printers to increase output dramatically. This in turn led to the mid-century establishment of the first big publishing houses of the era, including Appleton's, Harper and Brothers, and Scribner's. As historian Paul Gutjahr has noted, "publishers at the turn of the nineteenth century rarely produced print runs over two thousand copies," but by "midcentury, American publishing had so radically changed that editions of 30,000, 50,000 even 100,000 copies were common."<sup>42</sup>

### The Amateur Historians in the Early Republic and Antebellum years

Until the final two decades of the nineteenth century, almost all history writing was necessarily produced by amateur nonacademic writers, since before that time, there was no academic historical profession. History was not offered as a course of college study in the United States and there was no degree certifying someone as a "real" historian. Amateur historians were generally cut from the same cloth. As George Callcott pointed out, most were male, Protestant, and came from families of standing in their communities. On the whole, these historians were well educated in contrast to the general public. Whereas in 1860 less than one percent of Americans had attended college, 70% of amateur historians had. Still, some very popular

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<sup>42</sup> Charlotte E. Morgan, *The Origin and History of the New York Employing Printers' Association: The Evolution of a Trade Association* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), 40. Paul C. Gutjahr, preface to *Popular American Literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century*, ed. Paul C. Gutjahr (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), cited in Gregory M. Pfitzer, *Popular History and the Literary Marketplace, 1840-1920* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 4.

successful amateur historians did not attend college. Amateur historians wrote both national and local history narratives.<sup>43</sup>

### Amateur National Histories

The most popular books of history in this era told national stories. George Callcott pointed out that these works, geared toward attracting a large public audience, included biographies of nationally famous people or dramatic accounts of historical events often pertaining to the Revolution. Telling an exciting or morally appealing story was at times more important to these “mass market” writers than was adhering to facts. For example, in his popular biographies of George Washington, Mason Locke Weems invented anecdotes about George Washington, including the story of Washington chopping down the cherry tree, where George professes, “I can't tell a lie, Pa; you know I can't tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet”-a story that has become part of the nation's mythology.<sup>44</sup> Later in the century popular writer Benson Lossing poured over the research of others and then churned out compelling works including *Lives of the Presidents* (1847) and *Biographical Sketches of the Signers* (1848). As historian David Van Tassell points out, Lossing's primary objective was to write history that reached and educated the public:

Their content focused on “teaching by example.” Lossing and his publishers styled their books for the masses as well- small, cheap volumes that were easy to carry. Despite the fact that these works weren't as erudite as some of those others published at the same time many Americans learned much of their American history from these works.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> George H. Callcott, “Historians in Nineteenth Century America,” *New England Quarterly* 32 (1959), 497.

<sup>44</sup> Callcott, “Historians,” 519. Mason Locke Weems, *The Life and Times of George Washington, with Curious Anecdotes Laudable to Himself and Exemplary to his Countrymen* (Philadelphia: Matthew Carey, 1810). For more on Weems, see Lewis Geary, *The Book Peddling Parson: An Account of the Life of Mason Locke Weems* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Press, 1984).

<sup>45</sup> David D. Van Tassell, “Benson J. Lossing, Pen and Pencil Historian,” *American Quarterly* 6 (1954), 37.

In the same period, historians more scholarly than Lossing and Weems also produced national histories that were better researched, more erudite, and, while not as widely read as the mass-market books were still popular and oriented toward a general educated readership. The most famous historian in the nation was George Bancroft, the only historian at the time with a PhD (Bancroft's PhD was from the University of Gottingham in Germany where he studied Greek and natural science. He also took a course of history in Berlin). In 1834 he published the first volume of his *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent*. Bancroft's work combined rigorous research written in the romantic style typical for his time, written — as Peter Novick characterized it — with a “combination of the ‘intrusive’ authorial presence, the explicit moralizing, and overt partisanship” that was later reviled by professional historians. Historian Greg Pfitzer notes that some publishers recruited popular writers from other fields to write history, including novelists Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, and poet-journalist William Cullen Bryant. For these authors, the art of writing history was as important as the facts presented in their narrative.<sup>46</sup>

### Local History Writing in the Nineteenth Century

While stories about the nation may have been bestsellers, according to a survey by George Callcott, between 1800 and 1860 local history about a town, state or region was the most common type of history narrative written. Its popularity continued through to the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>47</sup>

The early antiquarians were generally well-regarded men who held a variety of professions, the majority being college educated Congregational ministers. Local history writing

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<sup>46</sup> Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 46; Pfitzer, *Popular History*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Callcott, “Historians,” 501.

was usually not profitable for its authors, in small communities the demand was small and printing limited runs was expensive.<sup>48</sup> Writing history was a matter of passion for the past. In her portrait of Sylvester Judd, the author of several local histories in western Massachusetts, historian Marla Miller depicts Judd as a dedicated antiquarian. A self-taught son of a shopkeeper, Judd rose to become editor of the *Hampshire Gazette*. In 1834 at the age of 46, he left his job to become a full-time historian. While not wealthy, Judd determined he had the means to live a humbler life and pursue his antiquarian interest. While he wrote several volumes of local history narrative, Judd's greatest legacy was 60 unpublished manuscript volumes of cramped writing of local history, a manifestation of his antiquarian passion.<sup>49</sup>

Antiquarians founded the many historical societies that were established after the Revolution and throughout the nineteenth century. In turn these historical societies were largely responsible for promoting the writing of local history narrative. For example during its first thirty years, the Massachusetts Historical Society, founded in 1792, sought to publish "a complete gazetteer" of towns in Massachusetts. Many of the first Massachusetts town histories, often short sketches, were written in response to a survey sent by the Massachusetts Historical Society.<sup>50</sup>

After the Civil War, the number of local history narratives expanded greatly, paralleling the expansion of publication of popular history in the mid-nineteenth century. While all history saw an increase in sales due in part to expanded printing capacity, historians cite several factors that spurred the publication of local history in particular. First, in the wake of the Civil War, there was high interest in documenting the war experiences of local regiments. Also, in the Midwest new migrants from the East coast, eager to promote the history of their new home, established

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 502, 514.

<sup>49</sup> Marla R. Miller, "Introduction: Pastkeeping in Another Small Place" in *Cultivating a Past: Essays on the History of Hadley, Massachusetts*, ed. Marla R. Miller (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 3-5.

<sup>50</sup> Russo, *Keepers*, 16-17.

historical societies and wrote local histories. Newspapers around the country regularly published popular local history columns intended for locals who wanted to learn about the places they lived and for transplants who wanted to read about the communities they had left behind. In addition, local histories were written to commemorate local and national heroes as well as to document their local past before the elderly passed away.<sup>51</sup>

The country's centennial celebration in 1876 initiated a spate of history writing as well. As Carol Kammen has pointed out, many towns responded to President Ulysses S. Grant's entreaty to "write the histories of their hometowns." Towns simultaneously celebrated their national and local past by promoting the writing of a town history (in addition to hosting ceremonies and pageants).<sup>52</sup> While these newer local histories, such as George Sheldon's *A History of Deerfield*, tended to be longer with more elaborate descriptions than earlier works, there was no more analysis in these later nineteenth century works than in their earlier counterparts.<sup>53</sup>

The nineteenth century local history narrative established the narrative format that would be used to write (and stereotype) local history into the twenty-first century. Local historians generally avoided the prevailing literary melodramatic style seen in the works of writers like Sir Walter Scott or Harriet Beecher Stowe. Local historians also eschewed the exaggerated mythmaking seen in contemporary biographies of prominent politicians such as Weems' biography of George Washington.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Russo, *Keepers*, 79-83; John Long and Peggy Tuck Sinko, "The New Local History," *Public Historian* 11 (1989), 95-101; Kammen, *On Doing*, 16-18.

<sup>52</sup> Kammen, *On Doing*, 15; Russo, *Keepers*, 79-80.

<sup>53</sup> George Sheldon, *A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts, 2 vols.* (Greenfield, Mass.: E.A. Hall and Co., 1895-96).

<sup>54</sup> Russo, *Keepers*, 73.

The earliest volumes, usually written by inexperienced writers passionate about preserving the past in a factual manner, were compilations of existing documents or brief descriptions arranged topically or chronologically. Topics in these early works included sketches of a town's topography (major geological features); descriptions of historically significant sites, such as the location of the first church; settlement history and histories of the church, schools, or industry. Many included biographical sketches of important people in the town's history. They tended to address national events only in so far as they were connected to the particular community they were writing about. These histories generally avoided controversial topics that might reflect poorly on the community such as failed businesses, the poor who had been warned out, or the mad. (Of course, as noted before, filiopietism and hagiography were not unique to local historians.) Sources included town and church records, vital records, genealogies and at times reminiscences. By the mid-nineteenth century local history authors employed more descriptive narrative in their work.<sup>55</sup>

In the late-nineteenth century, publishing companies codified a formula for the local history narrative of smaller rural communities. Reflecting the increasing commercialization and industrialization of commerce, many publishers, based mainly in the Midwest, got into the business of manufacturing local histories. Rather than use local writers, these commercial firms usually "paid in-house staff for research and writing," to write histories of smaller towns and communities.<sup>56</sup> Between 1870 and World War I they produced thousands of local histories for the Midwest, New York, Pennsylvania, and California. As John Long and Peggy Tuck pointed out, "with their half-leather bindings and gold-embossed covers, [they] were the nineteenth-century

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-24, 50-3.

<sup>56</sup> Russo, *Keepers*, 164.

equivalents of our contemporary coffee table books.” These books were often paid for through advance subscriptions by people who supplied information for their own biographies.<sup>57</sup>

As David Russo describes, structurally, the typical late-nineteenth century local history narrative had three parts: a chronologically sequenced narrative focusing on the settlement and early years of the community; a series of chapters organized by subject that described aspects of the community including things such as its government, commerce, clubs and parks; and finally a set of biographical sketches of prominent individuals and early settlers.<sup>58</sup> Still, despite this commercialization, independent local historians continued to publish histories, some of which were quite lengthy, such as Hiram Barrus’ 1881 nearly 300 page *History of the Town of Goshen* published.<sup>59</sup>

Today’s historians sometimes critique nineteenth (and twentieth) century local historians for not contextualizing their work. However, local historians did not all fail to recognize the importance of national history. Rather, many purposely sought to provide a supplement to the American story by providing information about the lives of people in small American communities that otherwise would go unrecorded. In 1892, local historian Abiel Moore Caverly of Pittsford, Vermont clearly states his case:

The more familiar we become with the history of our country, the stronger is our attachment to it. The outlines of this history have been faithfully written, but the integral parts of which it has been made up have not received the attention they deserve. We read of Bunker Hill, Brooklyn, Saratoga and Yorktown, but we should remember that those conflicts were but the eruptions of fires that were burning all over the country, and kindling into military life and activity every city, town and hamlet. Wherever there were patriotic hearts there was a recruiting station or camping ground, where men were mustered or were trained for the conflict. The scenes enacted at Trenton, Princeton and Bennington were but the more prominent exhibitions of military prowess, seized upon and described by the general historian,

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<sup>57</sup> John Long and Peggy Tuck Sinko, “The New Local History,” 95.

<sup>58</sup> Russo, *Keepers*, 37.

<sup>59</sup> Hiram Barrus, *History of the Town of Goshen, Hampshire County, Massachusetts* (Boston, Mass.: Hiram Barrus, 1881).

while the less dazzling, though equally interesting and important events, that transpired in rural districts far beyond the limits of the public gaze, obtain less attention than they deserve. Now to gather up these obscure items of history and to arrange them in some permanent form for the benefit of those who shall hereafter live, is the work not of the general but of the town historian. This tract of earth, called Pittsford, though merely an insignificant speck upon the map of our country, has been the theatre of some stirring events, but the generations which were active in them have long since passed to that — “undiscovered country, from whose bourn No traveler returns;” and as they left but few records, we can gather from this source only fragments of their history. To connect these so as to form one continuous narrative, we are obliged, sometimes, to resort to uncertain tradition.<sup>60</sup>

For the remainder of the book, Caverly’s narrative follows traditional terrain: a transcription of early records and brief accounts of the more prominent inhabitants and their experience at war or with the Native Americans.

### Predominance of New England in Local History Town Histories

As with the early narratives about American local history, the majority of town histories were written by New Englanders, particularly those from Massachusetts. Local history scholar David Russo explained this phenomenon by suggesting more than in other places, Massachusetts residents “viewed their communities as special and...worth writing about.” These same towns tended to preserve family and town records as well.<sup>61</sup> This view was probably reinforced by many contemporary national historians who also valorized New England’s heritage. As historian Edmund Morgan wrote:

Although Virginia was older than New England, with an older representative assembly, although that assembly was the first to denounce parliamentary taxation, although a Virginian wrote the *Declaration of Independence*, although a Virginian commanded the Revolutionary armies and became the first President of the United States and the foremost national hero ever after, New Englanders captured the nation’s past. As W.F. Craven has brilliantly shown, the first New Englanders’

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<sup>60</sup> A.M. Caverly, *History of the town of Pittsford, Vt., with biographical sketches and family records* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle & Co, 1872), 1-2.

<sup>61</sup> Russo, *Keepers*, 27, 95-99.



sacrifices for principle made them more attractive as ancestors than the first Virginians.”<sup>62</sup>

Other historians question the absolute primacy of New England in local history narrative. Wisconsin Historical Society member Tom McKay has conjectured that if the scope of local history narrative is expanded beyond books of town history to include other forms, there was an abundance of local history narrative in the form of county, regional and state histories, as well as pamphlets or serialized newspaper articles in other regions of the country. Writers in New England may have written more book-length town histories than historians in other regions because in New England the town was the primary governmental structure for many years while in other locations such as the Midwest, the county or the state was the main way a region was organized *and* written about.<sup>63</sup> By analyzing the myriad forms of narrative local history, in the context of that region’s history including form of government, culture and class of inhabitants, age of town, the spectrum of nineteenth and early twentieth century local history might look quite different. Still, New England and Massachusetts did create a model for local history writing in the late nineteenth century, a model that became the modern model (and) stereotype of much amateur local history.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Edward S. Morgan, “Historians of Early New England” in Billington, ed., *Reinterpretation*, 43.

<sup>63</sup> Tom McKay, review of *Keepers of Our Past: Local Historical Writing in the United States, 1820's-1930's*, by David J. Russo, *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 73 (Summer, 1990), 304.

<sup>64</sup> It is also interesting to consider how alternative forms of histories about a place complicate the definition of local history narrative. For example some nineteenth-century slave narratives when focused on a particular place, such as an elaborate description of a plantation, are part of the local history of that place. Whether they should be considered local history *narrative* warrants further discussion.

## **The Rise of Academic Local History Narrative**

### New Professional History

While local history narrative was thriving in the late nineteenth century, the landscape of history writing was undergoing a seismic transformation with the rise of the field of professional academic history. Up until the last three decades of the nineteenth century no distinction was made between the status of amateur and professional historians, or local and national history writers, because there was not a professional group of historians at the time. Certainly there were famous historians such as George Bancroft and Mason Locke Weems. However, most local historians were well respected both personally and for their craft.

This began to change in the 1870s and 1880s when Americans who had studied advanced history in Germany began to bring both the methods as well as the sense of professionalism to the teaching of history in academic settings in the United States. As John Higham explained, many of the early professional historians studied at Johns Hopkins University in the 1880s under one of the first professionally trained historians, Herbert Baxter Adams, who received his PhD in history from Heidelberg, Germany, in 1876. The field of history expanded rapidly in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>65</sup>

These “new” historians brought a new sense of purpose to the field of history. As Peter Novick noted, they valued scientific investigation, objective standards for knowledge, and formal training. They generally believed that professional historical inquiry ought to focus on national history and abandon what they considered the irrelevant details found in the history of small towns and biographies of unknown community heroes.<sup>66</sup> These new historians also embraced a narrative style that, unlike many nineteenth century writers, minimized the voice of the author in

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<sup>65</sup> John Higham, “Herbert Baxter Adams and the Study of Local History,” *American Historical Review* 89 (1984), 1225-1239.

<sup>66</sup> Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 36-37.

their quest to be objective. They criticized leading independent historians such as George Bancroft, his narrative style with its “combination of the ‘intrusive’ authorial presence, the explicit moralizing, and overt partisanship.”<sup>67</sup> Some of these new professional historians believed that amateur historians were unscientific and biased in their practice.

## The American Historical Association and the Growing Gap Between Academic and Amateur History

The most prominent symbol of the growing professionalization of history was the 1884 establishment of the American Historical Association (AHA), one of many professional associations formed in the United States at the time. AHA founders hoped to establish a new school of history separate from professional social science.<sup>68</sup> In the beginning, the organization, including its leadership, was made up of a combination of amateur and professionally- trained historians. John Higham explains that the AHA’s first president, Herbert Baxter Adams, sought to maintain the inclusiveness and unity of amateur and professional historians. He also “envisaged an eventual rewriting of national history in terms of local history.”<sup>69</sup> However, Adams’ successors had different ideas. In 1895 a group of professors in the AHA, led by his former student J. Franklin Jameson, rebelled against Adams, took over the leadership, and “began to deliberately reorient the organization toward professionally trained historians and away from

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>68</sup> David D. Van Tassell, “From Learned Society to Professional Organization: The American Historical Association, 1884-1900,” *American Historical Review* 89 (1984), 929-30.

<sup>69</sup> John Higham, “Herbert Baxter Adams,” 1230,1238. Unfortunately, as John Higham explains, Adams embraced a weak obscure theory of Germanic Teutonic history to justify the importance of local history, which his prodigy, J. Franklin Jameson vehemently rejected. Adam’s weak theory combined with the intense resolve of new scholars to improve and purify history contributed to a schism between professional and local history. Higham speculates a different outcome might have occurred if Adams had embraced a more plausible theory, perhaps akin to the Turner thesis, that convincingly demonstrated the interrelationship between national and local history and by extension, professional and amateur historians.

amateurs.”<sup>70</sup> In 1897 Jameson publicly attacked the antiquarianism of local history as practiced in the United States, charging that the state and local historical societies had made

much slighter contributions to knowledge than similar bodies in France and Germany, for having improved their publications only marginally in the past forty years, for ignoring everything that had happened since the American Revolution, and for ‘gross misuse’ of their library funds to feed a ravenous interest in genealogy.<sup>71</sup>

Carol Kammen observes that by the turn of the century, the AHA was dominated by academically-trained professionals who focused on national trends and strived for an objective narrative voice. They tended to denigrate local history and the amateurs who wrote it. The same professional historians viewed popular history with similar disdain. As Pfitzer argues, “they came to believe in short that “whatever popularizes vulgarizes.”<sup>72</sup> According to Gregory Pfitzer this attitude contributed to the weakening demand by the public for all types of popular history.<sup>73</sup>

## Professional Historians and Local History

Professional historians did not abandon the local altogether. Some professional historians looked at the small community with an eye to the national narrative. As Ian Tyrell explains, in professional history, the antiquarian focus on individuals and institutions of discrete communities was replaced by an analysis of communities that considered the influence of outside forces — frontier, sectionalism, economic, and social, that shaped the development of the democratic institutions in these individual towns. This in turn was used to explain American exceptionalism

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<sup>70</sup> For example, meetings were moved away from Washington DC (where many amateur historians lived) to college campuses which were populated by professionally trained professors. In addition, the new AHA journal, *American Historical Review*, “was placed under strictly professional editorship and removed from Adam’s influence.” Higham, “Herbert Baxter Adams,” 1230.

<sup>71</sup> Higham, “Herbert Baxter Adams,” 1237.

<sup>72</sup> Pfitzer, *History*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Carol Kammen, *On Doing*, 23; Pfitzer, *History*, 14-15.

in politics and culture. One of the most influential national scholars who looked at small communities, Frederick Jackson Turner, selected for study those communities that fit into the larger national story of his frontier thesis, omitting those that did not. While in the past local history often referred to the influence of outside forces (for example, God's vision or the Revolution on the individuality of a community) in the new version the significance of a small community lay in its contribution to the national story.<sup>74</sup> John Higham even suggests that if Turner's theories had been known at the establishment of the AHA, the rejection of the local might have been mitigated considerably.<sup>75</sup>

### Regional Associations: Forums for Academic and Amateur Local History

Despite the overt criticism of local history by the AHA, as Larry Tise points out, in many places in the United States amateur historians and academic historians continued to collaborate throughout the twentieth century through regional history associations. In 1903 the AHA organized a Pacific Coast Branch to serve AHA members in the American and Canadian West. In 1904 AHA state and local historians established their own subgroup, the Conference of State and Local Historical Societies, to serve both amateurs and professionals with a regional and local focus.<sup>76</sup> In addition, the period between 1890 and 1910 saw the establishment or rejuvenation of

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<sup>74</sup> Ian Tyrell, "Public at the Creation," 30. Turner's influential works on the frontier thesis include Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, 1921) and *The Significance of Sections in American History* (New York: Holt, 1932).

<sup>75</sup> Higham, "Herbert Baxter Adams," 1238. Higham speculates a different outcome might have occurred if Adams had embraced a more plausible theory, perhaps akin to the Turner thesis, that convincingly demonstrated the interrelationship between national and local history and by extension, professional and amateur historians.

<sup>76</sup> Larry E. Tise, "State and Local History: A Future From the Past," *The Public Historian* 1 (1979), 14-15. For example, the Idaho Historical Society was established in 1907, the Historical Society of Frankford (Philadelphia) in 1905 and the Oklahoma Historical Society in 1893.

many new state and regional historical societies.<sup>77</sup> These organizations fostered and published the work of both professional and amateur historians. For example the objective of the Illinois Historical Society, established in 1899 as part of the Illinois State Historical Library, was to “encourage research and writing on subjects of Illinois history.” Its journal, published as its annual report, was a combination of writings by local and professional historians.<sup>78</sup>

Still, some regional associations that appeared to be a comfortable mix of professional and amateur historians were actually dominated by AHA professionals. Ian Tyrrell found that the Mississippi Valley Historical Association (MVHA) from its 1907 establishment was dominated by professional historians who sought to align state and local history with their progressive storyline of the history of the nation state America:

Academic history [led by Jameson] sought to colonize the state historical societies and universities with "scientifically" trained people with doctorates from the universities. These archivists and other public history professionals sought to provide a national interpretation of the regional history that “put the federal state at the apex of local and state development.”<sup>79</sup>

In 1938 the *Review* adopted the subtitle *A Journal of American History*. By 1950 the organization, dominated by professional academic historians, was renamed the Organization of American History (OAH).<sup>80</sup> In 1964 the full name of the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* was changed to *The Journal of American History*.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 16. For a sophisticated analysis of an early twentieth-century historical society, see Keith A. Erekson, “Alternative paths to the past: the ‘Lincoln inquiry’ and the practice of history in America, 1880-1939,” PhD diss., Indiana University, 2008.

<sup>78</sup> Illinois State Historical Society (accessed June 1, 2009), available from <http://www.historyillinois.org>.

<sup>79</sup> Ian Tyrrell, “Making Nations/Making States: American Historians in the Context of Empire,” *Journal of American History* 86 (1999), 1027.

<sup>80</sup> Tyrrell, “Public at the Creation,” 43.

<sup>81</sup> “History of the JAH,” (accessed May 6, 2009), available from <http://www.journalofamericanhistory.org/about/history.html>.

Similarly, in 1940 the Conference of State and Local Historical Societies broke away from the American Historical Association. Members, most of whom worked as public historians, immediately established the independent American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). The organization's mission was "the promotion of effort and activity in the fields of state, provincial, and local history in the United States and Canada."<sup>82</sup>

The shift of the MVHA to the OAH and the AHA Conference on State and Local History to the AASLH reflected a hardening of the separation between amateur and professional historians across the country by the mid-twentieth century. As John Higham points out, while "in 1925 one sixth of the contributors to five leading state historical journals were academic people, thirty years later two-thirds of the contributors to the same journals had academic connections."<sup>83</sup> This trend also indicates that increasingly professional historians were writing about state and local history in professional journals, perhaps forcing amateurs to find other venues.

### Academic Local History Narratives up to the 1960s

While in the first decades of the twentieth century professional historians tended to focus on developing a national synthesis, there were always some historians who believed that intensive study of smaller locations would yield important information about the development of the United States. Rather than looking at local or regional communities to fit a national storyline (as Turner did), these scholars sought to clarify the national storyline by looking at historical details found in the study of smaller communities. For example, pioneering urban historian Constance

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<sup>82</sup> "AASLH: Yesterday and Today" (accessed May 6, 2009), available from <http://www.aaslh.org/aboutus.htm>. For more information on the origins of the AASLH and its relationship with the AHA see Frederick Rath, *Local History, National Heritage: Reflections on the History of AASLH* (Nashville, Tenn.: AltaMira Press, 1991).

<sup>83</sup> John Higham, *History*, 34.

McLaughlin Green as early as 1940 appreciated the importance of the small details of ordinary people for achieving a more accurate depiction of America's past:

Because of our varied population stocks and their sharply differentiated cultural inheritances, the widely differing environments which the United States includes, and the rapidity of changes in our economic life, the problems confronting the social historians assume mighty proportions...American history in the past has been written from the top down, an approach feasible enough as long as scholars were content to write only political and diplomatic history. But the necessity of studying American life from the bottom up becomes obvious for the cultural historian. The story of how American people have lived as individuals and as communities must be told by details.<sup>84</sup>

Green cited an example of the value of local study to the national narrative. While it had been assumed that all immigrants passed through Ellis Island and then headed west, a more thorough investigation of port communities revealed that immigrants had entered through a variety of ports such as New Orleans.<sup>85</sup>

### Amateur Local History up to the 1960s

Because there have been no comprehensive surveys of local history of the twentieth century that include a wide scope of local history narrative types, it is difficult to make generalizations about the production of amateur local history narrative in the first half of the twentieth century. However, it appears that fewer works of amateur local history were written

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<sup>84</sup> Constance McLaughlin Green, "The Value of Local History" in Ware, *Cultural Approach*, 90. originally published in *The Cultural Approach to History: Edited for the American Historical*, 279.

<sup>85</sup> Green, 280. According to Robert R. Dysktra and William Silag, "Doing Local History: Monographic Approaches to the Smaller Community," *American Quarterly*, 37 (1985), 415-419, other significant mid-twentieth academic studies of the small community include: Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America 1625-1742* (New York: Ronald Press, 1938); Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, "A Meaning for Turner's Frontier, Democracy in the Old Northwest," *Political Science Quarterly* 69 (1954), 321-53; Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954); Merle Curti, *The Making of an American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier County* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959).



than previously, at least in formerly high volume areas like Massachusetts.<sup>86</sup> There are several possible reasons for this. First, fewer publishers were willing to publish local history due to short profits. Furthermore, as Carol Kammen has suggested, fewer prominent men were choosing to spend their spare time writing local history. This could be due to the declining status of local and amateur history (in comparison to professional history) as well as to the increase in alternative forms of middle and upper class leisure activities such as golf and other country club related activities.<sup>87</sup>

As with other occupations such as teaching that became feminized when men left for other work, more women began to work in local history environments and to write local history. Carol Kammen finds that before 1900 only two women in New York had written books on local history (however she does acknowledge they had been writing local history for newspapers in the nineteenth century). After the 1880s, Kammen states, at first slowly, women began to assume the mantle of guardian of local history. She notes that by the late 1970s eighty percent of historians registered with the state of New York were women, populating archives, historical societies and other local history venues.<sup>88</sup> However, while many women authored local histories, a rudimentary analysis suggests that an equal number of men continued to write local history as

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<sup>86</sup> While neither Russo nor Kammen have published a survey of this, an examination of the Massachusetts Historical Society library database of local histories reveals that there was a great production of local history narratives in the second half of the nineteenth century, at least in that state. The number of new local history narratives dropped off steeply after World War I, and many fewer were produced from the beginning of World War 2 up to the 1970s. In the 1970s, with the bicentennial there was a sharp increase. At the same time, the renewed interest in popular nonfiction history narrative led to an increase in the 1980s and 1990s of works in local history. Finally, academic studies of local communities also increased greatly after in the 1960s.

<sup>87</sup> Kammen, *On Doing*, 26.

<sup>88</sup> Kammen, *On Doing*, 26-27.

well. Again, a broad local history survey would illuminate the role of gender and local history narrative.<sup>89</sup>

The early twentieth century saw the emergence of new forms of local history concurrent with traditional forms.<sup>90</sup> As David Russo observed, in one new type of local history the author told a town's history through the dramatic narrative about compelling historical individuals or events previously touched upon in an older town history.<sup>91</sup> These shorter, cheaper and more entertaining narratives were designed to have wide appeal to anyone with a general interest in history, not only those elite who had a particular stake in a community. For example, Ralph Birdsall's *1917: The Story of Cooperstown (NY)* which told the local history of the town of Cooperstown through the prism of local hero American novelist James Fenimore Cooper was reviewed favorably in the *New York Times*: "It is a long procession of people that Mr. Birdsall files past us in his pages, from the long-vanished Mohawks...the pioneers...down to the present day, telling of their lives, their work, their play, their loves.... He has done his work well and has made as human and as interesting a book of that kind as any could wish."<sup>92</sup> Written for a large audience and with a different purpose, these new shorter compelling narratives continued to share the stage with traditional amateur local histories. In addition, amateurs continued to publish their local histories in regional journals and newspapers. For example, California's *Overland Monthly*

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<sup>89</sup> While more women became involved in the preservation and promotion of local history archives and historical societies, there is no evidence that women overwhelmingly replaced men in the writing of local history though they certainly began to write it in much greater numbers. For the feminization of history museums, see the chapter on Monticello in Patricia West, *Domesticating History: the Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1999.) Also see Joan M. Brumberg and Nancy Tomes, "Women in the Professions: A Research Agenda for American Historians," *Reviews in American History* 10 (1982), 285-286 and Marla Miller and Anne Lanning, "Common Parlors: Women and the Recreation of Community Identity in Deerfield, Massachusetts, 1870-1920," in *Gender & History* 6 (1944), 435-455.

<sup>90</sup> Russo, *Keepers*, 184.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 185-187.

<sup>92</sup> Ralph Birdsall, *The Story of Cooperstown* (Cooperstown, New York: Arthur H. Crist, 1920); Rev. of "The Story of Cooperstown," *New York Times*, July 29, 1917.

(1868–1935) was a mix of history and poetry, while the *Pony Express Courier: Stories of Pioneers and Old Trails* (1934–1944) was mostly a collection of reminiscences of earlier years.<sup>93</sup>

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the Depression in the 1930s prompted another surge in the production of amateur local history narrative. As David Gerber notes, between 1936 and 1940, unemployed artists, teachers and other professionals with the WPA's Folklore Project and the Federal Writers Project interviewed people including former slaves and people living in Appalachia about their lives. These records were then transcribed and compiled.<sup>94</sup> In addition WPA workers “produced a distinguished series of expensive local and state history guide books with a strong historical orientation...as well as a number of inexpensive mass marketed popular histories and social documentaries based on transcribed interviews with ordinary folks as well as public art.”<sup>95</sup>

#### Academic Local History After the 1950's: The “New” Social History and Local History

In the 1960s two principal features reshaped the landscape of local history narrative. First with the advent of the “new” social history, there was a shift away from focusing on national history to examining smaller communities of people to find distinctive features or patterns that could then be compared and contrasted to the national story. Secondly, around the same time, the style of academic writing changed dramatically. Professional historians began to regularly employ the methodologies and accompanying language of the social sciences — anthropology,

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<sup>93</sup> Archived copies *Overland Monthly* can be accessed through the University Michigan's Making of America digital journal collection at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maajrnl/browse.journals/over.html>. The Pony Express Courier archives are housed at the University of California, Sacramento, <http://library.csus.edu/guides/rogenmoserd/californiahistory.html#samcc>.

<sup>94</sup> American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writer's Project, 1936-1940. On library of Congress Website, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>.

<sup>95</sup> David Gerber, “Local and Community History: Some Cautionary Remarks on an ideas whose time has returned,” in *Pursuit*, ed. Kammen, 219.

linguistics, political science. It was a language intended for and accessible to other academic historians, but this change exacerbated the gulf between academic historians and amateur historians (as well as the gap between historians and the public).<sup>96</sup> As a result of these shifts, by the 1960s many academic historians received notice and acclaim for writing histories of small communities that were intended for an academic audience in a language that was often inaccessible to members of the community studied. This was followed in the 1980s by another form of academic study of the small community, microhistory. Both of these trends led to a proliferation of academic local history.

### The Community Study as Local History

The “new” social history movement used social science methods of statistical analysis to examine the lives of ordinary groups of people who had been systematically overlooked in conventional histories. This movement was pioneered by E.P. Thompson in his 1963 book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, which chronicled the toll the industrial revolution took on ordinary working class people in England.<sup>97</sup> Thompson’s work and methodology inspired a generation of historians to study previously neglected or overlooked groups sparking many new academic subfields including labor history, African American history and Women’s history to name a few.

Some historians, such as Eric Foner, have heralded the 1960s as a new era in history.<sup>98</sup> However, others, like Ellen Fitzpatrick, argued that the so-called “new” social history had solid

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<sup>96</sup> Russo, *Keepers*, 203.

<sup>97</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963).

<sup>98</sup> Eric Foner, *The New American History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

antecedents in the American historical scholarship which had been obscured by the popular work of consensus historians like Richard Hofstadter.<sup>99</sup>

While historians may argue whether or not this interest in social history was new or not, it certainly did reinvigorate and legitimize the historical scholarship of the small community. For example, academic historians like Robert Dykstra and William Silag who previously dismissed local history as inconsequential believed that local history of a community could be taken seriously now that historians “ma[de] some use of available quantitative data.” Similarly, Robert C. Twombly wrote that the new methodologies applied to the study of community “lent respectability to local history.”<sup>100</sup>

Community historians looked at broad statistical demographic information of relatively small groups (such as patterns of social mobility) in order to draw conclusions about American history and society.<sup>101</sup> They mined little-used sources such as local records and census data for much of their research. They then compared their findings to the prevailing synthesis. John Higham noted that at the time, young historians were attracted to community studies because of their “manageable scale” and the “immediate presence of a concrete community” which was “both intellectually attractive and emotionally engaging.”<sup>102</sup> Yet at the same time the work examined the heart of American history by querying accepted theories. As Terry Barnhart wrote, community history is

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<sup>99</sup> Ellen Fitzpatrick, *History's Memory: Writing America's Past: 1880-1980* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.) Fitzpatrick cites the work of professional historians such as W.E.B. DuBois and his work on slavery, Carter Woodson on black history- he founded the *Journal of Negro History*, Norman and Caroline Ware on labor history, Marcus Hansen on immigrants, Roger Shugg on class struggles in the south, Constance Green and Vera Shlakman on New England factory towns, Angie Debo on Native American history. All wrote long before the 1960's.

<sup>100</sup> Dykstra and Silag, “Doing Local,” 416; Robert C. Twombly, “A Tale of Two Towns,” *Reviews in American History* 8 (1980), 162.

<sup>101</sup> Dykstra and Silag, “Doing Local,” 418.

<sup>102</sup> Higham, “Herbert Baxter Adams,” 1238-39.

less concerned with tracing the local course of national events and more with getting at the kinds of formal and informal networks that define individuals, groups, and entire communities on their own terms. It examines the processes of community building that have historically defined a given locality, such as social mobility, immigration, urbanization, industrialization, and interactions between these various long-term processes.<sup>103</sup>

In the early 1970s there was a spate of community studies focusing on early New England. Unlike the much-acclaimed earlier New England studies of Perry Miller and Samuel Eliot Morison, which examined the writings of leaders and intellectuals, these newer studies sought to determine how ordinary people actually lived during these times.<sup>104</sup> Researchers looked for clues in “non-literary” sources often left to the genealogists such as wills, deeds, inventories and court records and used techniques employed by disciplines of social psychology, cultural anthropology, demography, and geography.<sup>105</sup> Some authors looked at everyday patterns to gain insight into communities while others examined unusual events that shed lights on cultural norms.<sup>106</sup> For all of these authors the importance of the close scrutiny of these small towns was what they revealed about American history.<sup>107</sup>

As Patricia Tracy recounts, some academics heartily welcomed the innovative perspectives the community studies gave to established historical theory. Research found community studies called into question generally accepted assumptions such as pre-colonial

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<sup>103</sup> Barnhart, “Of Wholes and Parts,” 18.

<sup>104</sup> Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953).

<sup>105</sup> Richard S. Dunne, “The Social History of Early New England,” *American Quarterly* 24 (1972), 661-664.

<sup>106</sup> Richard D. Brown, “Microhistory.” Philip Greven, *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), and Kenneth Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736* (New York: Norton, 1970), looked at the everyday workings of the community to gain an understanding of political and social structures in that community. In contrast, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974) and Robert Gross, *The Minutemen and their World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976) focused on atypical events in order to understand a community.

<sup>107</sup> Richard D. Brown, “Microhistory and Post-Modernism,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 23 (2003), 10.

American exceptionalism, the process of acculturation by early Americans, and showed that there were multiple, not single, patterns of development in New England communities.<sup>108</sup>

These new community studies were not greeted without controversy. The very smallness of scale that some academics considered to be a strength was considered a weakness by others. These critics believed that the value of such small and narrow studies, as far as creating a greater understanding of national themes or creating useful theoretical frameworks, was limited by their small size,<sup>109</sup> Dykstra and Silage complained that “the generalizations keep getting smaller in scope to the point which they don’t matter anymore.”<sup>110</sup> Conversely, critic Richard D. Brown cited the tendency of community studies to make a much larger claim than evidence warranted:

The [study] we find most convincing, such as Robert A. Gross’s *The Minutemen and their World*, we take to be ‘representative.’ Really we have no alternative. But the broad generalizations of grand narratives and syntheses cannot make powerful truth claims when they stand, necessarily, on a footing of disparate monographs.<sup>111</sup>

Dykstra and Silag criticized small studies like Lockridge’s and Greven’s because they did not include a big enough sample to show a pattern. Others like critic John J. Waters pointed out that because community records were not uniformly created or preserved, there might be a bias to select towns with better records.<sup>112</sup> In addition, the diversity of researchers of each individual community might lead to methodological variations, skewing the results. Still others criticized the

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<sup>108</sup> Patricia Tracy, “Early Modern Microhistory: the ‘Little Communities’ of Pre-Revolutionary New England,” (paper presented at Microhistory Conference at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, Conn., October 1999), 3-4. For example Lockridge in his work on Dedham contradicted earlier work by pointing out that the new Puritan settlers of the town actually exhibited characteristics reflecting not only their Puritan beliefs but their European heritage as well.

<sup>109</sup> Tracy, “Early Modern Microhistory,” 6.

<sup>110</sup> Dykstra and Silag, “Doing Local,” 425.

<sup>111</sup> Richard D. Brown, “Microhistory,” 10.

<sup>112</sup> John J. Waters, “Reviewed Work(s): *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century* by Michael Zuckerman,” *The New England Quarterly* 4 (1971), 153-155.

tendency of many of the first academic community histories to focus on New England and early America, omitting other regions at times.<sup>113</sup>

Some historians felt that the very intimacy between a single community and a historian he or she was studying necessarily produced a biased view of the community being written about. As Patricia Tracy wrote, “people felt so close to “my people” that...they didn’t want to ask hard questions about their behavior...”<sup>114</sup> Others found the studies too impersonal. Local history scholar David Russo considered academic community studies to be a dangerous assault on the uniqueness of amateur local history. By looking for patterns to find ways local communities fit into the national narrative, academic historians removed the uniqueness from local history. Russo argued that academics use a fixed view of community in order to analyze it when in reality, “a community has differing meanings depending on how it is defined.” In contrast, he asserted, amateur historians are concerned with how some people in their own communities really lived.<sup>115</sup>

Either way, by the end of the 1970s, few historians were still pursuing the intensely statistical community study. Tracy cited several reasons for this loss of interest. First, a thorough statistical analysis of an individual community was too labor-intensive to attract many scholars. In addition there was not enough culture of cooperation in history departments to coordinate in-depth multi-community studies that were important to finding patterns.<sup>116</sup> Still, community studies did not completely disappear. Inspired historians continued to combat broad

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<sup>113</sup> Tracy, “Early Modern Microhistory,” 7-8.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>115</sup> Russo, *Keepers*, 211.

<sup>116</sup> Tracy, “Early Modern Microhistory,” 12-13.



general assumptions of American history by examining the structures of individual communities in different parts of the country.<sup>117</sup>

### Microhistory as Local History

By the 1980s a new form of academic local history — microhistory — developed in American academic history. Combining compelling narrative with historical inquiry, the form provided new models for the academic local historian. This place-based history first emerged in mid-1970s Europe, particularly Italy and France. The term “microhistory” or “microhistoria” was coined by the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg to describe works such as his own *The Cheese and the Worms*, in which the writer-scholar closely examines an historical individual or event in order to learn something about the culture as a whole. Like many social historians, European microhistorians sought to uncover the stories of the peasantry who had been overlooked by previous historians, mostly because of the scarcity of documentation. Writers like Emmanuelle Leroy Ladurie in *Montaillou* (1975), E.P Thompson in *Whigs and Hunters* (1975), and Natalie Zemon Davis in *Culture and Society in Early Modern France* (1975) examined deviant cases involving peasantry which had left a paper trail in Inquisitorial or court records and even, at times, in the popular press.<sup>118</sup> These records gave historians access to the experiences and mentality of peasants, allowing them to give “voice to a people who had hitherto been silent.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> For example, in Darrett Rutman and Anita Rutman, *A Place in Time: Middlesex County, Virginia 1650-1750* (New York: Norton, 1984) the authors revealed social tensions in the world of middling white planters in Middlesex County during the late seventeenth century.

<sup>118</sup> Matti Peltonen, “Clues, Margins, and Monads: The Micro-Macro Link in Historical Research,” *History and Theory* 40 (2001), 347; Emmanuelle Leroy Ladurie, *Montaillou* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (London: Allen Lane, 1975); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Culture and Society in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).

<sup>119</sup> Brown, “Microhistory,” 12.

As with community historians, microhistorians believed that intense scrutiny for a particular place or event in history revealed information about society and culture that macrohistory, with its broad swaths and generalizations, might have overlooked. Jill Lepore pointed out that in contrast to biography, in microhistory an individual story is profiled to reveal not what is singular about that case, but what is generally true about the group of people that individual comes from.<sup>120</sup>

Methodologically, microhistory was different from community studies in that it was less quantitative, and focused more on “the web of causal relationships” that caused an individual to act in a certain way. Microhistorians relied extensively on the quantitative research of previous historians, but then wove these studies into a cohesive whole, revealing much about the social and cultural history of the times. These microhistories were written in a narrative meant to appeal to popular audiences (the educated nonspecialist) as well as the academic scholar. While microhistories were densely grounded in historical scholarship, the narrative was often structured around an historical event or incident in the life of an individual.<sup>121</sup>

In the United States, the genre of microhistory took academic history by storm in 1990 with the publication of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s Pulitzer prize-winning *A Midwife’s Tale the Life of Martha Ballard Based on her Diary 1785-1812*.<sup>122</sup> Ulrich’s analysis brings to life Martha Ballard from the pages of a plain succinct diary and in so doing examines gender and culture in

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<sup>120</sup> Jill Lepore, “Historians That Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography,” *Journal of American History* 88 (2001), 129.

<sup>121</sup> Peltonin, “Clues”, .347-8. For example, in Davis’s *The Return of Martin Guerre*, while the story of Guerre, his wife, Bertrand, and the imposter, Arnaud du Tihl, is engaging, the narrative reveals a tremendous amount about 16<sup>th</sup> Century French peasantry such as the variations between towns of individual freedoms and marriage customs. Also, unlike a popular novel which usually resolves its mysteries, because of the paucity of the records, and Davis’ adherence to the record, the reader is left with lingering questions about how Guerre and wife fared after his dramatic return.

<sup>122</sup> In fact, Richard D. Brown considers microhistory to have been in existence much longer in the U.S., for he considers the community studies of the late 1960s and early 1970s to be microhistory. For a more detailed analysis of Brown’s interpretation of microhistory see his *Microhistory 11-12*.

early nineteenth-century Maine. In the past two decades, microhistories have proliferated in the United States with some historians winning prized popular writing awards.<sup>123</sup> Because they presented well-researched history through a compelling story about a single event or person in a well-written narrative style, unlike community studies, microhistories appealed to popular audiences as well as academics. Some historians embraced microhistory because it allowed historians to provide depth to complex analyses.<sup>124</sup>

As with community studies, some critics have found microhistory contributes to a lack of cohesion of historical inquiry. Thomas Bender worried that microhistories would “contribute to a postmodern fragmentation begun in the 1960s, and continues to the present day.” His concern was that historians and their works, “know so much about so little that they are unable to contribute to an overall understanding or synthesis of national history.”<sup>125</sup>

Richard D. Brown countered that microhistory, while not providing a much-desired synthesis, is a “powerful corrective” to the inherent problem of synthesis which must necessarily sacrifice or gloss over truth and contradictions for the sake of cohesion. Such depth contributed by microhistory therefore allays the skeptical post-modern folk who believe all synthesis is inherently false. Good microhistory not only adds another layer of research to the increasingly complex puzzle, but also at times challenges the layout of the puzzle itself.<sup>126</sup> Similarly Carlo

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<sup>123</sup> For example, in 1995 Alan Taylor won a Pulitzer Prize for *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Knopf, 1995) while Kevin Boyle's *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights and Murder in the Jazz Age* (New York: Holt, 2004) won the National Book Award in 2004.

<sup>124</sup> For example, Atlantic culture historian Lara Putnam in “To study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World,” *Journal of Social History* 39 (2006), 620-21 pointed out that in her field, Atlantic Studies, which involves tracking the intersection and interrelation of cultures in the Atlantic world, microhistories allowed her to scrutinize regional variations and discern the complexity of interactions of the different peoples she studied, especially when their trajectory extended beyond traditional parameters of nation-states.

<sup>125</sup> Thomas Bender, “Strategies of Narrative Synthesis in American History,” *American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), 129-53.

<sup>126</sup> Brown, “Microhistory,” 8.

Ginzburg argued that indeed microhistories are an antidote to the postmodernism of the 1980s and 1990s, because they pull fragments of information into a cohesive narrative. Rather than emphasize the fragments which the research uncovers, the microhistorian constructs a possible story, a narrative, based on the fragments.<sup>127</sup>

Others scholars have been concerned that some microhistorians are too willing to arrive at a general conclusion based on the paucity of evidence offered by a small-scale study. David Russo expressed concern that the scholarly pressure to make broad generalizations based on findings in a small community or single incident causes historians to both make insufficiently researched historical conclusions as well as obscure the uniqueness of a small community. As evidence he cites the widely used practice of “creating greatly inflated titles.”<sup>128</sup>

### The Significance of Microhistory Narrative as Local History

Microhistory signaled the return of the primacy of narrative to the historical study of small communities. For local history writers of a small community with an academic background, microhistory provides a model for creating an engaging narrative centered on a small event in a particular place that is grounded in scholarly research. Three such micro-local histories in western Massachusetts include *In the Shadow of the Dam* by Elizabeth Sharpe, *The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler* by Richard D. and Irene Quenzler Brown and Gretchen Holbrook Gerstina’s *Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How an Extraordinary Eighteenth Century Family Moved Out of Slavery and into Legend*.<sup>129</sup> Written by experienced professional historians, these works are characterized by

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<sup>127</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know About It,” trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi, *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1993), 32.

<sup>128</sup> David Russo, *Clio Confused: Troubling Aspects of Historical Study from the Perspective of U.S. History*, (Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1995), 109.

<sup>129</sup> Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Shadow of the Dam: The Aftermath of the Mill River Flood of 1874* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Richard D. and Irene Quenzler Brown, *The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler: A Story of Rape, Incest and Justice in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Gretchen

excellent historical research, compelling stories, and engaging writing. Of the three, Gerzina's work is the most self-reflective, interspersing the tale of her findings with the stories of the two African American who lived in Deerfield as slaves, achieved freedom, and dealt with the various obstacles of the racial and economic morays of the time. Sharpe's *Dam* is the most straightforward of the three, balancing the story of the 1874 failing of a Williamsburg Dam and ensuing flood with the many stories of ordinary people who were affected by it. Her challenge is to engage readers in lives of so many whose subjectivities remain out of reach. The Browns' *Ephraim Wheeler* is the most academic of the three and is more challenging for the lay reader. The story is packed full of insight about race and poverty in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Berkshire hills. All of these authors had to grapple with the challenge of telling the stories of mostly obscure historical figures that left little record of their personal lives. Academics writing local history using the narrative mode of microhistory will need to find a balance between including historical fact and perspective with providing a straightforward readable narrative. How that balance is achieved depends on the writer and the readers.

### Metanarratives of Local History: Outliers on the Spectrum

In addition to community history and microhistory, the shifting paradigm of history that began in the 1960's with its questioning of historical objectivity spawned another type of local history narrative, what I call the metanarrative of local history. Up to now this historiography has interpreted a simplistic relationship between writer and place: the writer observes a place and writes up those observations. Except in the case of the Gerzina book just discussed, a historian generally keeps his or her voice out of the narrative as well as does not include details about the research process.

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Holbrook Gerzina, *Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How an Extraordinary Eighteenth Century Family Moved Out of Slavery and into Legend* (New York: Amistad, 2008).

Yet in recent years many academic historians when writing about a particular place have focused less on the conclusions of their observations and more on the *process* of that observation and what it reveals about historical interpretation itself. In contrast to most community historians and microhistorians who ultimately are interested in mining a small event for information that can lead to a greater historical understanding, writers of metanarratives of place are interested in the way meanings of place are constructed, function, and change over time. They consider these reflections to be the principal part of the history. Like most early community studies, the language of these metanarratives is often highly academic and is not generally intended for the general reading population.

But for those who do read these, they prompt the reader to rethink assumptions about the place being written about. Such metanarratives of place encompass a wide variety of topics. They discuss how local stories are preserved in urban and rural landscape, are shaped by collective and individual memories, or are conveyed in unintended ways by historical landmarks and memorials. For example, in Martha Norkunas's narrative *The Politics of Public Memory: Tourism, History and Ethnicity in Monterey, California* (1993), Norkunas points out the less obvious structural factors that shape historical interpretation of a historic site and which effectively allow the presentation of only one version of the truth, suppressing the others.<sup>130</sup> Using primarily Marxian analysis, she looks at the hegemony of elitist meaning that mediates Monterey's historic sites. For example, exhibitions focus on the upper class lifestyle in twentieth century Monterey while overlooking the largely unexplored and potentially messier story of cannery workers who lived there at the same time.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Martha Norkunas, *The Politics of Public Memory: Tourism, History and Ethnicity in Monterey, California* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1993).

<sup>131</sup> Other examples of metanarratives of place include: James Young *Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes in Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999); Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press,

Because these metanarratives examine how historical meaning is constructed and mediated in a particular location and inform the reader about the history of place, they belong on the local history spectrum.<sup>132</sup> Furthermore, some of these metanarratives can be quite instructive in terms of the practice of local history. In these reflective narratives, historians are as concerned with writing about their experience as practitioners as they are about the place itself. These reflections by experienced practitioners of local history highlight issues that students of local history would do well to consider as they contemplate a local history project.

### Amateur Local History Narrative in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century

Like academic local history, local history has had a bit of a renaissance in the last thirty years. Sparked by the United States bicentennial anniversary, some towns issued reprints of nineteenth century editions while other towns created new town histories. In addition, more publishers have become involved in the local history business such as *Arcadia*, *The History Press* and small presses such as *Rowman AltaMira*. There has also been a revolution in self-publishing making it easier for individuals to publish local history without large capital outlays. With new publishing “on demand” technology one can publish 300 books for \$400.

There also has been an increase in the publication of “how to” books of local history. The AASLH has produced a host of technical leaflets, some of which can be used for the writer of local history, such as “Methods of Research for the Amateur Historian” and “Using Oral History.”<sup>133</sup> Some book length works on local history by academics include Carol Kammen’s *On Doing Local History* and her latest *Encyclopedia of Local History* as well as David Kyvig and

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1991); David Glassberg *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2001).

<sup>132</sup> As with other types of local history narratives, they can be placed on other history spectrums as well.

<sup>133</sup> American Association of State and Local History, Technical Leaflets: “Methods of Research for the Amateur Historian,” (1969) and “Using Oral History” (1980).

Marty Myron's *Nearby History* and parts of Joseph Amato's *Rethinking Local History*. While Kyvig and Myron's work is geared toward practicing all types of local history, from architectural preservation to preserving photographs, it contains useful information for the amateur local history writer. For example, they describe how archives where one researches are organized, how to take notes, and tips on the writing process itself. Kammen's work, *On Doing Local History*, is oriented to the amateur local history writer, and provides thoughtful and practical discussion about the practice of local history. For example, she provides an overview of the past of local history, discusses at length issues of censorship, and provides topics appropriate for local history writers. Kammen's *Encyclopedia of Local History* is a unique compendium of terms associated with the current practice of local history. Entries range from "account books" to "AASLH" to "American Exceptionalism" to "Historical society" and "holiday." Joseph Amato's work, in contrast, is less directly instructive than the other two, and is more a meditation on the nature of local history and his concerns and values concerning how it ought to be written. While it is unclear how many amateur historians will read these works, they all offer information that is useful for both amateur and professional historians who are considering writing local history.<sup>134</sup>

In addition, the expanding field of oral history combined with accessible technology has been transformative to local history as well. Small, easy to use recorders have made oral history accessible to anyone who can afford or has access to equipment. Many community historians, both academic and nonacademic, have used oral history to recover the past of members of a community. Some community historians have chosen to use oral histories to find information of community members for whom otherwise there was scant documentary evidence. Others seek to provide the reader with the immediacy and authenticity of the transcribed narrative unmediated by a historians' voice. In the past two decades both the number of oral histories and the

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<sup>134</sup> Carol Kammen, *On Doing Local History*; David Kyvig and Marty Myron, *Nearby History*, Joseph P. Amato, *Rethinking Local History*.



scholarship about oral history practice have proliferated.<sup>135</sup> A recent glance in a recent *Oral History Review* reveals the sheer amount of community history being performed through oral history from interviews with Italian immigrants in Minnesota to residents in the Eastern shore of Maryland and the Owen valley in southern California.<sup>136</sup>

One innovative approach, StoryCorps, The National Oral History Project, created by David Isay, seeks to create an oral history of America. As Elisabeth Pozzi Thanner explains, the project provides a booth complete with simple digital equipment and technical advisor for people to interview each other about their lives without the presence of a mediator. There are no research objectives or agendas on the part of StoryCorps staff and the interview time is limited to 45 minutes. The interviews, with permission, are then placed in the Oral History Archive in the Library of Congress. Because the interviewing and agenda is left to the participants, the project has the capacity to capture the lives of ordinary people in a way formal research cannot.<sup>137</sup>

## **Conclusion**

We are at an exciting point in local history. The age-old division between local and national and amateur and professional history seems antiquated and not fruitful. The spectrum of local history is vibrant, encompassing the vernacular, the highly academic and everything in between. The trajectory of local history's past profiled in this chapter illustrates the origins and

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<sup>135</sup> Some useful texts on oral history include Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, ed., *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, (Routledge, 2006); Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1991) and Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>136</sup> Sarah Milligan, "From Bridge to Boardwalk: An Audio Journey across Maryland's Eastern Shore," *Oral History Review* 36 (2009) 86-87; Jacob Cohen, "Voices From This Long Brown Land: Oral Recollections of Owens Valley Lives and Manzanar Pasts," *Oral History Review*, 98-100; Donna M. DeBlasio, "Italian Voices: Making Minnesota Our Home," *Oral History Review* (2009), 101-103.

<sup>137</sup> Elisabeth Pozzi-Thanner, "Reviews of Storycorps. Produced by Sound Portraits Productions," *Oral History Review* 32 (2005), 103-104.

development of the current spectrum of local history narrative. Yet certain areas of the history of local history narrative remain under-researched. The development of local history narrative from colonization to the present in different geographic or demographic regions has not been systematically analyzed. Such an analysis may lead to an understanding of the vernacular in local history, much like the vernacular found in material culture or architecture. Similarly, methods of teaching local history in graduate programs could be codified as well. By integrating different perspectives from the amateur and academic local history traditions, practitioners better serve the communities they work with.

Finally, by fully embracing the writings of amateur historians into the big tent of local history narrative, and by incorporating that into the historiography of academic history, graduate students and professors alike can begin to realize the full potential of engaging with the local history of the surrounding communities.

## CHAPTER 4

### LOCAL HISTORIANS AND THE PUBLIC: ISSUES IN THE PRACTICE OF LOCAL HISTORY

Some scholarly local histories are concerned as much with the process of creating the local history as about the place itself. A few of these are concerned with the practical aspects of working in the community being written about. The following discussion examines this small but growing body of local history scholarship highlighting issues historians may encounter as they research and write in the communities they are investigating.

As can be expected, truly candid works detailing the inevitable conflicts and tedium of working within a community are rare: authors may not want to offend the people they have worked with by disclosing conflicts, or simply do not have the time or inclination to write a self-reflective piece. Still, some authors conscientiously detail their experiences working within a community to produce a local history narrative. The majority of work discussed in this chapter is by academics intended for academics, although some is intended for a larger audience and a few works and interviews by amateur historians are included as well.

#### **Insider/Outsider Status**

As with the public historian, the local historian's interaction with the public can greatly affect the outcome of the historian's work. One significant factor of that interaction is the degree to which the historian is considered to be a part of the community (an "insider") or considered not to be a part of the community (an "outsider"). A historian's acceptance by stakeholders in a community's history can provide him or her access to resources, such as archives, town records and even people to interview for oral histories that may be difficult for outsiders to obtain.

However, the insider/outsider distinctions are not always clear-cut. As the following stories show, people from a community can be considered outsiders while those from the outside can be treated as the best-loved insiders. While one's status as an insider or outsider can affect the process of creating local history, just as important is how a historian makes use of that status.

Timothy Breen, a professor at Northwestern University in Illinois, was both a geographical and professional outsider when he was hired by the East Hampton (Long Island) Historical Society as the Resident Humanist to come live in and write a history of the community. In his lively page-turner, *Imagining the Past: East Hampton Histories*, Breen interweaves the challenges he experienced uncovering the local history of East Hampton with the history of the town itself.<sup>138</sup>

Breen's academic training and perspective put his vision of history in conflict with those who hired him. While the East Hampton Historical Society ostensibly engaged him to write a history of their community, it soon became clear that those who hired him wanted him to confirm and codify a particular version of their community's past that represented its early years as an insular and self-sufficient agricultural and fishing community. For them history was a fixed idea. Breen's job was simply to fill in the details from that early beginning to the present day.

By contrast, Breen, an academic, believed that history was not simply what happened at a certain place over a span of time, but how the meaning of the place changed over time. The historian's job was to unpack the web of those meanings rather than simply to confirm a single truth.

There are in fact, no 'truths'...waiting to be discovered. Even the most elaborate, quantitative explanations of past behavior are really only plausible constructions based on the analysis of selected bits of surviving evidence. A hermeneutical history of the kind that I have written explores the creation of truths. It is fundamentally an interpretive exercise, a sorting of conflicting perceptions and an appreciation of the

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<sup>138</sup> T.H.Breen, *Imagining the Past: East Hampton Histories* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1989).

narratives that humans have always invented to make sense of their lives.<sup>139</sup>

Despite the fact that as an academic from the Midwest, Breen was an outsider, he had the social skills to persuade most stakeholders of the community's history (who were often at odds with each other) to provide him access to information about the community's history. Because he was an outsider who had not been a participant in local disputes, or because they respected his academic credentials, many residents opened up to him, perhaps more than they would have to a resident from East Hampton.

Being an outsider geographically may also have given Breen the freedom to write more freely in his final narrative than he would have if had been an insider. In his book, which details both the history of the town as well as the process by which he investigated it, Breen depicts some members of the community in a poor light. Starting with his introduction, he makes no effort to mask his negative feelings about the community who invited him to study: "Put bluntly, it is one of the strangest communities that I have ever visited."<sup>140</sup> And that is just the beginning of it. Breen uses the technique of a nonfiction writer akin to John Berendt (author of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*) to describe people he encountered, who in turn seem like characters in a novel or memoir.<sup>141</sup> In his interviews with the various stakeholders in East Hampton's history, Breen reveals their flaws as well as their strengths, describing interactions about which a more discrete historian might remain silent. "David groans when he reads Kelsey's letter. He predicts it will cause him trouble just when the historical society is trying to develop a more professional

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>141</sup> John Berendt, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (New York: Random House, 1994).

image.”<sup>142</sup> As such, combined with a thorough historical analysis of East Hampton’s past, *Imagining the Past* is both a highly engaging and informative reading experience.

Breen justified this personal approach to writing the town’s history by framing his work as a sorting of interpretations of East Hampton rather than simply finding the history of the town:

This is not therefore, another history of East Hampton; it is a history of interpretation in East Hampton, or even precisely, an exploration of how the members of a community come to imagine themselves in the flow of time... Seen from this perspective, the project required that the ‘I’ telling the story come forward and announce his active participation in the making of history.<sup>143</sup>

Yet Breen, of all people, must have realized that almost all history involves interpretive analysis. Rather, it was Breen’s outsider status that allowed him to write his uniquely frank first person account with impunity. Living in Illinois, a thousand miles away from East Hampton, neither he nor his family members would run into the people he wrote about. It is questionable whether Breen would have been quite so blunt if his children were on the playground with the children of those he had written about, if the residents had been colleagues, or if he wanted more work writing history in East Hampton.

Like Timothy Breen, folklorist and historian Amanda Holmes was hired by a community group to write their town history. In her dissertation “Writing Local History: Reflections on Omena, Michigan: A Dissertation in Folklore and Folklife,” Holmes devotes an introductory chapter to her experiences writing the local history *Omena, A Place in Time* about a small farming and summer resort town in Michigan.<sup>144</sup>

Because Holmes summered in the community and knew many members of the Omena Historical Society, she was in many ways an insider. However, being familiar with the

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<sup>142</sup> Breen, *Imagining the Past*, 59.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>144</sup> Amanda J. Holmes, “Writing local history: Reflections on Omena, Michigan (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2004).

community did not eliminate conflicts with the committee overseeing her work. Holmes attributed some of the conflicts she experienced to the particular perspective she brings to local history as an academic folklorist and to the fact that she had her own past memories of Omena.

Among the issues I had to face within myself: the natural predilection of folklorists for the underrepresented and the underdog; the dynamics of control and power, both for members of the community and for myself; how to place emotion (even anger) in my work; and perhaps, most of all, the complications of writing about people and place one thinks one knows well.<sup>145</sup>

By contrast, nonacademic amateur local historian Joe Manning was an outsider whose gentle and forthright approach convinced residents of North Adams to share their stories with him. Manning, who was living in Connecticut, encountered the older industrial city when a conference there unexpectedly was cancelled. Immediately “smitten” with the community, Manning soon decided to create a book of interviews of ordinary people from North Adams telling their life stories. This eventually became his first book about North Adams, *Steeple*.<sup>146</sup> Manning found people to interview in different ways. For example, once he was sitting on a bench across the street from a senior center housed in a beautiful old building. Inspired, he wrote a poem about the building and being old in North Adams. When he showed the poem to the coordinator of the center, she said it expressed exactly what many older people in North Adams were feeling and invited Manning in to talk with some seniors. Other times he simply met informants on the street. According to Manning, by spending time with the people in North Adams, he became accepted as an insider:

During this long, rambling journey in search of a book, I have become the curious out-of-towner who asks questions, the man with the camera, the tape recorder, and the note pad. I have been the familiar visitor who stares up at the steeples, charges up hilly neighborhood streets, and lingers at the coffee shop window, writing down everything he sees.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>146</sup> Joe Manning, *Steeple: Sketches of North Adams* (Florence, Mass.: Flatiron Press, 1998).

My many visits to North Adams have made me a familiar figure around town. In April of 1997, there was an exhibition of my photographs at the North Adams Public Library. I have made a lot of new friends. I often drive up before dawn and hang out with some of the old-timers at ‘The Bean,’ a popular Main Street coffee shop. I’ve learned so much about the city, that I can usually hold my own in conversations. People are so friendly in this town. I’ve had a wonderful time.<sup>147</sup>

Though Manning was an outsider in North Adams, he found a way to connect with people that made him as trustworthy as an insider. People felt that he cared about them personally, the stories they had to tell, and the place where they lived. He was not there to study or judge or advance his career; he was there to tell the story. His low-key approach allowed him to get access to tales that otherwise might have remained untold.<sup>148</sup>

Being an insider may improve the professional historian’s craft as well. In an article lamenting the dearth of academics writing local history, historian David Danborn asserts professional historians writing about their own communities can gain more insight into that community than an outside academic ever could:

I am also coming to believe that professional historians can do better histories of the places where they live than they can of places where they do not live. Not only do professional historians have the sort of sustained contact with and immersion in the sources that outsiders lack, but they also know the community and its culture in a way outsiders cannot. Look at the work Joseph A. Amato and his colleagues have done at the Center for Rural and Regional Studies at Southwest Minnesota State University on the area’s agriculture, ethnicity, ecology, and rural life. How many scholars from outside southwestern Minnesota could know the area well enough to match those achievements?<sup>149</sup>

Danborn also argues that local history allows professors to be better community citizens and teachers when they face people who are knowledgeable, interested and have a stake

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>148</sup> Joe Manning, interview with author, Florence, Massachusetts, 11 November 2002.

<sup>149</sup> David B. Danborn, “Historical Musings: ‘Cast Down your Bucket Where you Are’: Professional Historians and Local History,” *South Dakota History* 33 (2003), 270-272.



in what is being researched. For Danborn, both historians and local people will benefit if historians engage in local history that is really in the “back yard” of the writer.

Yet even insiders with a close connection to a community cannot surmount the multiple understandings of the past that exist among individuals, even family members. In his reflective book, *Remembering Ahanagan: A History of Stories*, Richard White tried to ascertain the facts of his mother’s past in Kerry, Ireland and New York City.<sup>150</sup> As Sara’s son, White would appear to be the ultimate insider who would be most able to access her past. Yet removed from Sara both by generation, geography, and profession, White could not access the historical truth he sought. Continually discovering Sara’s stories did not line up with historical fact, White realized he was encountering the distressing discrepancy between historian and storyteller: "But this time I was not just a child listening. I was an adult and a historian, and I could not take my own mother at her word."<sup>151</sup> In trying to get closer to the truth, White constantly negotiated between historical fact and memory. White’s narrative illustrates the inherent instability of the insider/outsider relationship as a historian enters the realm of memory.

The experiences of Manning, Breen, Holmes, Danborn, and White demonstrate that the relationship between a historian and a community he or she works with is mediated at the very least by geography, culture, time, and memory. An understanding of the complexity of the insider/outsider relationship will ensure the local history writer a more effective connection with the community.

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<sup>150</sup> Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagan: Storytelling in a Family’s Past* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

## **Control of Content and Censorship**

While being an insider working in a local community can give the historian added insight, that same status can expose the historians to community pressure to change or censor their final narratives. Community pressure over content can also be intensified when a historian is paid by that community to write the history. The following section details some historians' struggles with communities over issues of censorship.

In his article, "The Risks of Professionalizing Local History: The Campaign to Suppress My Book," Robert Weyeneth recounts how he was pressured to censor his research on Kapi'olani Park in Honolulu.<sup>152</sup> A professor at the University of Hawaii and resident of Honolulu for five years, Weyeneth was hired by a local preservation society to write a book expanding on an earlier report he had written about the park. Weyeneth soon unearthed information about the park that was unpleasant to some members of the community. For example, whereas local myth held that a nineteenth-century king generously awarded the parkland to his subjects, research determined that the king had actually established a fashionable suburb on the parkland exclusively for wealthy patrons. In reality, the king had done nothing for the common man. Similarly, whereas local lore lauded a real estate developer for converting that same property into Kapi'olani Park in the 1980s, Weyeneth revealed that in the process the developer had ceded some of the best beachfront lots to wealthy individuals.

When it was discovered that Weyeneth planned to include this information in his forthcoming book, the historian found himself personally threatened with lawsuits of libel. "While scholars routinely put their research on the line when they deliver papers at conferences," Weyeneth mused, "I suddenly found myself pondering whether I was willing to defend my work

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<sup>152</sup> Robert Weyeneth, "The Risks of Professionalizing Local History: The Campaign to Suppress My Book," *Public History News* 24 (2003); Robert Weyeneth, *Kapi'olani Park: A History* (Honolulu: Kapiolani Park Preservation Society, 2002).

in a very different adversarial setting, the courtroom.”<sup>153</sup> As an academic, even though he was from the community, Weyeneth felt he was an outsider with different values:

Attorneys, as well as the general public, have little understanding of the interpretive nature of history or how professional historians actually work: how we ask questions about sources and points of view, how we analyze texts and try to think critically about them, how we rely on contextual knowledge of a period or place, how we seek to draw reasonable inferences from the evidence at hand and how an interpretation is eventually crafted. We know that there can be multiple and conflicting interpretations of events and that no historical interpretation is final.<sup>154</sup>

Weyeneth’s book was no more controversial than many scholarly works on a particular subject or community; the community anger came from the fact that the book he was writing, funded by a local preservationist society, was intended for and going to be read by the community that had a stake in that history. As Weyeneth wrote, “Because history matters to communities and families, the desire to control the meaning of the past can lead to the doors of law firms.”<sup>155</sup> Weyeneth’s report was ultimately published as *Kapi’olani Park: A History*.<sup>156</sup>

Being paid by a community to write about it can amplify the pressure on a local historian. In her dissertation, Amanda Holmes detailed the struggles she experienced with funders over what would be included in her history of Omena, Michigan. As funders of the book, the Omena Historical Society expected certain control over its content. Holmes’ contract established that her local history would be collaborative. A committee of Society members was established to oversee the project, from negotiating the contract to reviewing chapters before publication. Holmes came in conflict with the committee because she had a different vision from the community over ownership of the book. Even though the society was paying her to write their history, it was not possible for Holmes to completely set aside her own values and memories:

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<sup>153</sup> Weyeneth, “The Risks of Professionalizing Local History,” 1-2.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>156</sup> Weyeneth, *Kapi’olani Park*.

It can be easy to say that an author who is hired to write a local history should, of course, write what the community wants. But I know Omena as well, in my own way, and this personal stake, combined with my scholarly training, made it impossible for me to be merely an amanuensis.<sup>157</sup>

Holmes sought to avoid writing the typical local history members of the committee expected.

This history of Omena is intended not to be a typical local history. It does not present a straightforward narrative of Omena and its past. Instead, the work is a folkloric response, a creative compromise between the expectations of community steeped in the convention of local history as a roster of people and places set against a pastoral landscape and the vision of a folklorist trained to see the multiple layers of people and places.<sup>158</sup>

Holmes and the committee struggled over what information should be in the book as well as the interpretation of those facts. The principal funders of the book project were seasonal residents who wanted her narrative to focus on Omena's seasonal summer community which they considered to represent the most interesting and defining feature of Omena's past. At the same time, the committee had a dim view of the historical importance of the year-round residents, most of whom were farmers. From the perspective of the summer people on the book committee, the very existence of the farming community was dependent on the summer community who in purchasing their produce, could be considered benefactors of the year round population. "Farmers could not have survived, they thought, had it not been for the summer resorters bestowing their trade and giving them expanded opportunities to earn money."<sup>159</sup> However in Holmes' view, the two communities were mutually interdependent:

The summer life was possible only through services offered by locals, even if the farmers did not cast a glance upon the bay in the summer because they were too busy with their harvests, the most burdensome time of the year coming just when resorters came to the area seeking escape from the heat.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Holmes, *Writing Local History*, 8.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-54.

Holmes wanted to incorporate a substantive history of Omena’s farming community in her book. However, the committee did not agree. In the end, Holmes included a chapter on the farmers, but it was not as complete as she would have liked.

In another instance, the committee did not want Holmes to include the fact that in the past Jews had been banned from certain places in Omena. To circumvent this and other censoring, Holmes employed a technique she termed “juxtaposition.” She placed text boxes juxtaposing differing memories of a topic in the hope that an active reader would begin to question:

When I discovered that I could not openly discuss certain issues or point out the interactions of the various groups within the main text of the book, I placed them near each other in narratives, hoping to instill curiosity in the readers to know more about the lives I presented lurking in the shadows.<sup>161</sup>

Holmes also struggled with the committee over stylistic issues. For instance, some committee members felt that her book should not have endnotes because the small numbers signaled to the reader that it was a long dry book. Conversely, Holmes thought endnotes ought to be included, generally because they are a part of academic work, and in this case in particular because so many of the sources were based on oral histories. She wrote, “Much information that I was drawing on came from brief interviews conducted by members of the GHS, and I wanted readers to be able to determine for themselves if they trusted the source or not.”<sup>162</sup>

Holmes’ experience is a cautionary tale that would behoove all local historians to review, particularly if they receive funding for a project. Unfortunately, probably because of potential community backlash, Holmes’ frank essay on her experience writing local history can only be found in an unpublished introduction to her University of Pennsylvania dissertation. It is not part of the book she eventually published, *Omena, A Place in Time*.

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 61.

Similarly, Richard White in *Remembering Ahanagan* had to negotiate censorship issues with perhaps the most powerful lobbyist, his mother's love. Sara specifically asked White to suppress in his narrative of her life in Ireland certain stories including the sad ends of her relatives, Tom and Bridget, and the drunken slow death of their son, Tom. For Sara, orally spoken, their stories are gossip from the community, but on the page, in the words of an outsider, the written story seems cruel. She wanted him to edit them out, "'Have mercy,' she tells me." But as a historian White is committed to his story:

I recognize that this past is in part my own construction, but that seems all the more reason to hew to the rules of my craft. By making the private public, I risk hurting people, telling what they do not wish widely known, in the service of a dead thing—history... These people are dead, let them lie. Let the evil be buried with them, or at least, let it only be talked of among ourselves.<sup>163</sup>

White writes with sensitivity of the vulnerabilities that historians often negotiate when writing local histories. Though White ultimately withstood the pressure of censorship of these particular stories, his reflection of the cost of inclusion ultimately draws the reader deeper into his story than if he had casually cast those concerns aside.

By contrast, some believe it is the duty of the local historian to withstand community pressure to change or censor their work. In her discussion of censorship in *On Doing Local History*, local history scholar Carol Kammen chides local historians for succumbing to community pressure and censoring their work.<sup>164</sup> In particular, Kammen recounted the story of an (unnamed) local historian who chose not to include in her local history details of a bank failure because family members of those responsible were still alive. Kammen believed that the woman should have addressed the topic in a way that was tactful but disclosive. Kammen also generally criticizes amateur local historians who she says "typically" censor their work by avoiding writing

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<sup>163</sup> White, *Remembering*, 95.

<sup>164</sup> Carol Kammen, *On Doing Local History* 2d ed. (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2003), 62.

about topics that might make residents feel uncomfortable such as “study of local crime, race relations, and racial conflict, the actions of strikers and bosses, the role of alcohol licensing, and political topics of all sorts.” Writers avoid these issues because they “do not promote a picture of a unified community consciousness and a harmonious past.” This lack of controversy in local history in Kammen’s words, “shortchange[s] our communities and ourselves. In presenting local history as always positive, we deny the fact that the past was as controversial and complicated as we know it to be.”<sup>165</sup>

At the same time, Kammen also acknowledges that a historian considered a troublemaker might find it difficult to continue to practice in a community. “An ‘unreliable’ local historian, one who embarrasses area residents or makes them uncomfortable will soon find documents unavailable and people unwilling to cooperate.”<sup>166</sup> For Kammen, the principal justification for censorship is to ensure future access to important local historical resources. Unlike Richard White, Kammen appears to brush aside ethical reasons why a topic might better be avoided. For example, a family might be suffering challenging unrelated circumstances that embarrassment in a local history would only exacerbate. Or perhaps the author herself does not want to be socially alienated. Like public historians, working within the community as a local historian can force historians to confront ethical issues that are avoided by many professional historians working within the safe confines of a university, far away geographically and often temporally from subjects who rarely read their work anyway. At the same time, all historical writing involves some sort of censorship. Historians constantly choose which facts and interpretations to include and omit. At times, external pressure from colleagues, funders, political circumstance, or other origins influence these choices. The practice of writing history within a community explicitly raises issues about ethics and censorship that pertain to the entire profession.

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 6263.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 63.

## **The Historian with the Community Agenda**

Some historians engage in local history with a particular goal of influencing that community through history. Some, like Jim Green, have political agendas. Others, like Robert Weyeneth, believe in the importance of historical knowledge to healing a community with a secret. The following accounts discuss issues that arise in the practice of activist historians.

James R. Green, one of the most prominent activist historians in the United States, writes what he has termed movement history, “the body of work produced by scholars and activists passionately engaged in the study of social protest for moral and political reasons as well as intellectual ones.”<sup>167</sup> As a movement historian, Green has documented the history of relatively unexamined or misunderstood radical movements for social change such as a close examination of the turn-of-the-century-socialist movement in the southwestern states of Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas as well as the story behind the Chicago hanging of several people as anarchists after a policeman was killed in Haymarket during a protest for an eight hour working day in 1887.<sup>168</sup>

While these books make an important contribution to the scholarship of social movements and capitalism in the United States, an important part of Green’s work is to reach people outside the “ivory tower” of professional history by teaching movement history to working class Americans. By learning the history of past labor and social movements, students might be inspired to act to improve their own lives, and at the very least learn lessons from the success and failure of past labor efforts. To this end Green has reached out beyond scholarly

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<sup>167</sup> James Green, *Taking History to Heart: The Power of the Past in Building Social Movements* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>168</sup> James Green, *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement, and the Bombing that Divided Gilded Age America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006); *Grassroots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).



audience by writing for more accessible publications, and by creating a Labor Studies department at Boston's urban, commuter campus of the University of Massachusetts. Green also developed a series of history workshops for workers in which participants could learn and share stories about past and present labor movements.

Green believes that in order for a historian to access the history of those “at the bottom,” it is often necessary to go into communities to get information through oral history or testimonials from people who lived that history. For example, Green brought together former shoe workers in Lynn, Massachusetts and social historians who were studying Lynn and its tradition of working-class solidarity and union democracy” but who were also concerned about the deindustrialization of the community. At the meetings, staged as a reunion party for former workers, workers with the facilitation of historians shared many stories of their work and of their fight for better conditions at the factories. This type of research in Lynn's local labor history had two benefits for the historians: on the one hand, it provided them with fresh valuable stories and insights that could not be found any other way; on the other, it reduced the often gaping breach between the historian and the object of study.<sup>169</sup>

But as with other local historians, working with the community was not always smooth for Green and his allies as he frankly admits. Green details a few problems that arose at a workshop in Lawrence where Green hoped to elicit stories from former mill workers and their children about their work as well as about the Bread and Roses strike of 1912. During the event, a couple of male speakers dominated the discourse, preventing much dialogue, particularly from women in the room. In addition some attendees stated that they did not want to remember a painful past, which included clubbings in 1912 and jailings in 1919. Moreover, Green found that social historians as facilitators were unprepared to deal with the resistance to remember painful events or the accompanying trauma that could arise during remembrance. Another problem of

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<sup>169</sup> Green, *Taking History*, 57.

both the Lynn and Lawrence projects was that there was no tangible product of use to the workers. Finally, some faulted Green for trying to elicit personal stories and information without making a long-term commitment to working in the community and for not recruiting more community insiders to facilitate.<sup>170</sup>

Green took these issues to heart when he embarked on a labor history project in Boston. For this project, Green fostered collaboration between Boston historians, union activists, and clerical workers to research, interpret and write their own history of working within the union to improve their working conditions. Through many meetings and workshops over a year and a half, the working group of over 100 people produced the booklet *They Can't Run the Office Without Us*, in which the worker's wrote their own movement history and also told readers how to document their own history.<sup>171</sup>

For Green, the possibilities of movement history in which workers actively are participants in the projects far outweigh the drawbacks.<sup>172</sup> An understanding of the past of movements in a community can lead to possibility for political action in the future. He writes:

In two decades, I learned from those students that historical narratives can do more than just redeem the memory of past struggles; they can help people think of themselves as historical figures who, like those who came before them, have crucial moral and political choices to make. Sometimes, stories of the past provide hope, sometimes guidance. They don't provide anything as concrete as solutions to current problems, but they do impart a sense of how tough choices were made in the past, how history was shaped by human intervention, how certain decisions explained what happened to the labor movement, what went right — and wrong.

Seeing the past with movement eyes has helped thousands of labor and community

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 60-68.

<sup>172</sup> Oral history is often used as a way of gathering information, connecting with a community, and working towards social change in community history projects. For a comprehensive bibliography and a good introductory overview to using oral history in the context of local history, see David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You*, 2d. ed. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 103-122.

activists envision a revived form of social movement unionism that welcomes broad alliances, that embraces cultural diversity, that fosters international solidarity, and that displays tactical creativity...<sup>173</sup>

Some historians critique Green's approach to movement history for ignoring the inherent power inequities between the academics and the workers. After all, as a history professor who comes from the rarified world of academia, despite his best intentions, Green wielded power over some of the workers he collaborated with. His interest in radical politics and persuasive manner could have influenced the ways community informants chose to express their memories. Despite his efforts to distribute authority between the historians and the workers, it was the academically trained historians, not the workers, who ultimately drafted three of the six chapters in the final booklet. One reviewer questioned Green's claims to have inspired workers to activism citing a lack of evidence of the long-term impact of his projects on the project participants.<sup>174</sup>

Green's work with small community groups can inform the work of local historians. His failures and successes have showed how important it is for an academic local historian who is an outsider to connect with allies from within the community not only to gain access and the trust of community members, but also to incorporate their ideas both in the process and product of creating a community history. But his experience also cautions historians to be aware of their own agendas as they approach community history.

Similarly, Robert Weyeneth's essay recounting his research in the small town of Centralia, Washington revealed the disconnect that can occur between a well-meaning historian who believes that dealing with the past will provide healing and the community members who

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<sup>173</sup> James Green, *Taking History to Heart* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 21.

<sup>174</sup> Michael Gordon, review of *Taking History to Heart: The Power of the Past in Building Social Movements*, by James Green. *The Oral History Review* 29 (2002), 136.

would just as well let the forgotten past remain forgotten.<sup>175</sup> As he wrote in “History, He Wrote: Murder, Politics, and the Challenges of Public History in a Community with a Secret,” Weyeneth was not prepared for the community resistance to the reinterpretation of a bloody skirmish between veteran and Wobbly groups on Armistice Day parade in 1919 during which labor activists killed four veterans who tried to destroy a union hall. Later that night, a mob lynched labor activist Wesley Everest who they mistakenly thought was the leader. Ultimately several labor activists were convicted of the murder of the veterans, but no one was ever charged with the lynching. While a monument was erected to honor the veterans claiming the four had died during a peaceful demonstration, Everest’s murder remained publicly unacknowledged. Because the event was so upsetting, many people in the town buried “the Centralia Massacre” in the past and for many years wanted it to remain that way. On the other hand, Weyeneth, (who was not from Centralia and had no other connection to the town beyond historical interest) believed it would be healing for the town to acknowledge and reconcile the unresolved past. Frustrated by resistance by some members of the community to discuss the conflict, Weyeneth wrote:

...outsiders (and many residents) seem to want something from Centralia that it is not prepared to supply: a public apology for the unpunished mob violence, an expression of remorse for the decades of silence, an acknowledgement simply of what happened in 1919.<sup>176</sup>

When Weyeneth nominated two sites to the National Register of Historic Places representing both sides of the skirmish —Wesley Everest’s grave and the memorial devoted to the four veterans — citizens held mixed reactions about the resurrection of the history.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Robert Weyeneth, “History, He Wrote: Murder, Politics, and the Challenges of Public History in a Community with a Secret” *Public Historian* 16 (1994), 51-73.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-73.

<sup>177</sup> Hal Spencer, “Washington Town Shines Light on Labor Riot Secret,” *Eugene Register Guard*, 2 September 1991.

In his account of his experience in Centralia, Weyeneth sounds genuinely puzzled and surprised by the community resistance to what he saw as a truthful and potentially healing account. His story shows the disconnect that can occur between a well-intentioned historian and the community who must live with the history a historian resurrects. At times, a historian who wants to tell a more accurate and enlightened version is faced with the choice of alienating a community he or she is trying to work with or compromising the truth. In these cases, especially where cultural politics are at stake, a historian may find him or herself in an irreconcilable situation. The authority of the historical truth is challenged by the authority of the community stakeholders.

### **Sharing Authority**

In his book *A Shared Authority*, public historian Michael Frisch addresses the kind of power concerns depicted by Green and Weyeneth.<sup>178</sup> Frisch seeks to reframe the relationship between academic historians and the public in a way that takes into account their power dynamic. In his book Frisch argues for more of a “shared authority” between the historian and the people he is writing about. He wants to find a middle ground that incorporates the insights of the scholar but at the same time does not let the “hegemonic authority” of the scholar dominate the interaction with informants. He also does not believe the members of the community need to view their history in parochial terms. By incorporating or creating a dialogue that respects and incorporates the “very real authority” of an audience, the final historical product — be it an exhibit, public program, or narrative — may be richer and more satisfying.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and History of Oral History* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1989).

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii-xxiii.

Frisch focuses on the nature of the shared authority that occurs within the oral history interview, not the circumstances surrounding it. As Linda Shopes explains, “Frisch emphasizes that he intended the phrase to encompass a rather more limited — if no less perceptive — concept ... [of] the ‘history-making offered by both interviewer and narrator’ within the context of the interview itself.”<sup>180</sup>

Some critics have questioned a historian’s true ability to share authority as described by Frisch. If only one person, the historian, possesses the right to share or hoard authority and the power inherent to that choice, then it is impossible to truly share it. Critics contend that true sharing of authority must begin before the first interview and before the project is designed, engaging the public in a “shared inquiry.” As Rebecca Conard explains in her introduction to an issue of *The Public Historian* devoted to reflective practice, public historians not only can try to share *authority* by allowing control during the interview and interpretative process, but also can share *inquiry* by including others in determining the questions as well as the methods of investigation.<sup>181</sup> This concept of “shared inquiry” ideally reframes the entire engagement between the historian and the public creating a true collaboration from determining the questions asked to selecting the methodologies employed.<sup>182</sup> Such a model allows for multiple understandings of the past to be incorporated into the process of creating a history project, be it a local history narrative or a local history exhibit.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Linda Shopes, “Sharing Authority,” *The Oral History Review* 30 (2003), 103.

<sup>181</sup> Rebecca Conard, “Public History as Reflective Practice: An Introduction,” *The Public Historian* 28 (2006), 9-13.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> For further discussion of different ways people understand the past, see David Glassberg, *A Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2001); David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

As public local historians Katherine T. Corbett and Howard S. Miller recognized, there is no simple recipe for a successful and fair collaboration; rather, the extent and nature of a shared inquiry depends on the variables of a particular context.<sup>184</sup> What matters is that the public historian is reflective of his or her practice during the collaborative process. Corbett and Miller described a variety of situations in which community members had a range of authority in the designing of local history exhibits at the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis. For example, one exhibit, *Through the Eyes of a Child*, was designed primarily by African American community members in coordination with a museum staff member. Disregarding the consulting historians' wishes, the exhibit designers omitted class issues and hardships that they experienced growing up in St. Louis. The result was an exhibit that centered on positive, nostalgic childhood memories imbued with middle class values. Despite the fact that, or rather, because it lacked the "critical" perspective of academic history, the exhibit was very popular in the community, drawing new visitors into the museum:

African-American audiences came in droves and loved the exhibit, in large part because it was theirs; they legitimately claimed ownership. Direct and decisive African-American involvement in the exhibit planning stages gave participants a stake in the outcome, and entree into an institution many previously had regarded as alien turf.<sup>185</sup>

Local history writers, like curators, would benefit from incorporating the reflective practice of shared inquiry into the practice of doing local history.

Even more radical than trying to collaborate fairly, David Russo believes that authority-sharing should not be attempted at all — rather, professional historians should not write local history. David Russo considers academic historians who write local history to be "poaching" on

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<sup>184</sup> Katharine T. Corbett and Howard S. Dick Miller, "A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry," *The Public Historian* 28 (2006), 15-38.

<sup>185</sup> Corbett and Tracy, "Shared Inquiry," 30.

the amateur local historian's territory.<sup>186</sup> His concern is that academic specialists will take over the discourse of local history as they have the rest of history, largely making it inaccessible to nonacademics — and further disconnecting people from their own past:

The emergence of academic historical study, with its emphasis on conceptual analytical thinking, on statistical evidence, and on technical terminology, has meant that a small intelligentsia has had the means to study our history that others do not, perhaps cannot share.<sup>187</sup>

Russo is concerned that academic versions of local history, in the interest of finding patterns and connecting the individual story to a national narrative, will discount and omit what is unique about each individual community. He also is worried academic versions will remove the connection between local history narratives and the community members who read them, either because they are written in inaccessible or uninteresting jargon or because their narrative does not seek to connect the reader with local history. Russo finds this would be a terrible loss as in his mind local history is one of the few remaining ways Americans connect to their past.

If academic historians take over the field of local history, its intellectuals and its general population lose the capacity to view a common past in a common way? What dangers lurk there? I wonder. I wish I knew.<sup>188</sup>

In *Rethinking Home*, Joseph Amato similarly discourages conventional academic historians from doing local history.<sup>189</sup> Amato, a professor of philosophy at Southwest Minnesota State University where he founded the history department and the Center for Regional and Rural Studies, concurs with Russo that academic narrative is unable to provide the local history

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<sup>186</sup> David Russo. "Some Impressions of the Nonacademic Local Historians and Their Writings," in *The Pursuit of Local History*, ed. Carol Kammen (Lanham, Maryland: Altamira Press, 1995).

<sup>187</sup> Russo, "Some Impressions," 17.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>189</sup> Joseph A. Amato, *Rethinking Home: A Case For Writing Local History*, (California, 2002).



narrative that a community seeks. He finds that the academic focus on local events primarily to reveal a clue about the national past:

is at odds with a local community's desire and need to "know and remember its own past" for its own sake, not because of some higher purpose.... Local history satisfies an innate human desire to be connected to a place. It feeds our hunger to experience life directly and on intimate terms.<sup>190</sup>

Amato also has a specific idea about what local historians ought to focus on: their rural way of life (and the memories of it) that is quickly disappearing due to the influence of national powers and homogenizing culture on small communities. He declares that "local historians must recount the story of the growing penetration and dominance of outside powers over local minds and landscapes. They must describe agencies and effects of change unequalled since settlement itself."<sup>191</sup> Shunning traditional subjects, Amato calls for local history writings to include topics such as scent, madness and deviancy in a community. At the same time, Amato hopes that local historians will shun most academic topics and perspectives, although he believes local historians should draw from the field of environmental history.

Both Russo and Amato share and exaggerate a sense of the danger academic local historians bring to local history as well as an unlikely fear that the amateur historian will disappear. With the ease of self-publishing available now, the number of histories by amateurs has only increased. At the same time, Amato's prescription for what a local historian ought to write about deprives the amateur the very vernacular expression that it seems Amato most covets. Still, Russo, Amato and Frisch caution academic local historians to approach the practice of local history mindfully, with full awareness of not only the backgrounds of the place they wish to study, but their own as well.

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 7.

## **Conclusion**

The writings profiled in this chapter highlight a few of the many issues local historians face when working within a community to write local history. Such accounts are invaluable to local history practitioners as they prepare to collaborate with communities to produce local history narratives. Yet there still are not enough. As more historians realize the importance of sharing their actual practice of working in communities to produce different types of local histories, this body of work will continue to expand.

## CHAPTER 5

### HENRIETTA S. NAHMER

#### AND THE CUMMINGTON SUFFRAGE CONVENTION OF 1881

##### A Convention in Cummington

On Tuesday, August 23 in 1881 a woman's suffrage convention was held in the Village Congregational Church in the small western Massachusetts town of Cummington. Attended by more than four hundred people, the convention included keynote speeches by some of the most famous suffragists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: Lucy Stone, her husband Henry Blackwell and the reformer socialite and author of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, Julia Ward Howe.

At the time of the convention, the United States was in the midst of what historians now call the Gilded Age and a full-fledged industrial revolution. While the majority of Americans still lived in rural areas, growing cities like New York, Boston, Buffalo, and Chicago were burgeoning with wealthy industrialists, newly arrived immigrants from Europe, and migrants from rural areas. The new wealth created by the economic activity provided a foundation for a growing middle class. Ever expanding railroads and waterways were transporting goods and people to these new centers. A marketplace for goods, these new cities also nurtured intellectuals, artists, radicals and reformers.

By contrast, in 1881 Cummington had a population of 880 residents — a decline from its 1840 high of 1280 people — most of whom were white Yankees.<sup>192</sup> Located in the rugged foothills of the Berkshires of western Massachusetts, 12 miles from the nearest train station, accessible only by horse, or by foot, it seemed an unlikely site for a woman's rights convention.

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<sup>192</sup> William W. Steeter and Daphne H. Morris. eds., *The Vital Records of Cummington, Massachusetts 1762-1900* (Cummington, Massachusetts: Cummington Historical Commission, 1979), 272-308.

Yet, Cummington had a tradition of activist reform. Thirty years before the Civil War residents had supported the abolition of slavery. Cummington abolitionists hosted antislavery conventions for as many as six consecutive years in the 1850s and early 1860s. The most celebrated antislavery speakers of the time including William Lloyd Garrison, one of the founders of the American Antislavery Society and editor of the antislavery newspaper *The Liberator*, attended these events. Was Cummington as active a center for suffrage as it had been for abolition?

The answer to this question has implications both for Cummington history and for the history of the Massachusetts woman suffrage movement. If the support for suffrage in Cummington were akin to that it showed for abolition three decades earlier, it would mean that Cummington had retained its politically radical heritage up to the twentieth century. For the history of suffrage in Massachusetts, such activism would point to rural outposts of suffrage activity that had perhaps been overlooked by urban-oriented suffrage historians.

On the other hand, other questions arise if the suffrage convention was a unique event. Why would a small town like Cummington host a single suffrage event with such star power? How was that related to the concurrent larger movement for woman suffrage in Massachusetts and the nation? And did the Cummington suffrage convention of 1881 make a difference in the lives of the individuals who attended or on the suffrage movement as a whole? This essay sets out to answer these questions.

## **Writing a Narrative about Henrietta S. Nahmer and the Suffrage Movement**

### Unearthing Information about the Woman Suffrage Movement in Cummington

The first challenge in researching Cummington suffrage was finding more information about the circumstances surrounding the convention. An 1881 article now stored in the Cummington archives and reprinted in the latest volume of Cummington history, gives basic information about the Cummington suffrage convention. In addition to Howe, Stone and Blackwell, other participants included John Howard Bryant and Parke Goodwin, the famous, late William Cullen Bryant's brother and son-in-law. Most importantly, the article cites the key to understanding this convention, the names of the principal organizers: Mrs. Henrietta S. Nahmer and Miss Fanny L. Rogers.

Born Henrietta S. Rogers, Henrietta S. Nahmer was the older sister of Fanny L. Rogers. Henrietta had married a man named Adolphus Nahmer, had two children, and lived in Cummington most of her life. Fanny Rogers had been a teacher and suffragist in Boston who worked closely with the leadership of the Massachusetts suffrage groups. Henrietta's suffrage work in Cummington seemed integrally connected to Fanny's activity. This presented a dilemma: which sister should the story follow? Who was more important historically? Was there a way to focus on both sisters? For audiences of the book, Henrietta was arguably more important because she lived longer in Cummington and was central to the Cummington suffrage activity. At the same time, Fanny lived almost a double life, spending most of the year teaching, living in boarding houses and working for suffrage in Boston, and summering in Cummington as a refined lady.

I chose to focus on Henrietta because of her strong connection to Cummington and because she was a rare example of a suffragist who lived and worked on the front lines of the movement. There has not been much research on ordinary people working for change because

they often leave little documentation behind. Yet, as more information about these low level activists emerges, historians might be able to determine to what extent the suffrage movement was a top-down operation, and to what extent activities were initiated from the grass-roots level. It also might be possible to get a more accurate demographic of women involved in the nineteenth-century suffrage movement. The story of Fanny L. Rogers is included insofar as her suffrage work relates to her sister's; she must wait for a chapter devoted entirely to her.

As this local history is intended primarily for a Cummington audience, and because there is no indication Henrietta was part of a local suffrage movement beyond Cummington, as well as time constraints, for this thesis I did only cursory research for clues to suffrage activity in surrounding towns. Given more time, I would have delved deeper for information in order to compare Cummington suffrage activities with that of other communities. For example, I would have tracked down the list (that I am pretty sure exists) from the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association of all the communities that in the early 1880s introduced a suffrage resolution in their town meetings. Such activity would indicate that there had been coordinated suffrage activity in those towns. I would then target those towns for further research. I also would find out how many smaller local suffrage and other types of conventions were held during that era in rural New England in order to determine the role of conventions as part of the political and popular culture. For now, such work will be left to future researchers.

### Searching for Henrietta S. Nahmer

Once I had Henrietta's name, I could begin to assemble the story of her efforts in the struggle for a woman's right to vote. Henrietta's biography was largely unknown before I began this project. She is mentioned briefly in a recently published history of Cummington because she

organized the suffrage convention.<sup>193</sup> But because Henrietta never achieved worldly success, no one has ever written about her life.

Unknown to all but a few local historians in her hometown, Henrietta S. Nahmer left a scant paper trail to fill in the details about her life. Like most local historians researching special but ordinary figures of the past, I have mined a variety of sources to create her biography. As a member of the Cummington Historical Commission, I had unlimited access to the town archives which include files about various Cummington institutions and individuals. I also drew heavily on local records including census, birth, death, marriage, and organizational records for Cummington and occasionally other towns. Through the good graces of historian Bill Streeter and the Town Clerk I obtained a key to the vault where town records are stored. In the mildewed vault located in the dank basement of the Cummington Community House, I had unlimited access to piles of key record books including nineteenth-century voter registration, tax, and school committee records.

In another stroke of luck, one of Henrietta's only descendents came to Cummington several years ago searching for information about Henrietta and other family members. He alerted me to her file in the Jones Library Archive in Amherst. This archive holds copies of local history newspaper articles Henrietta and her daughter Clementina D. Nahmer had written for the Springfield, Massachusetts paper *the Springfield Republican* in the early twentieth century. In addition to providing details about Henrietta's childhood in Cummington and some of her activities for suffrage, the articles also reveal that Henrietta and her daughter were journalists. The two women wrote much of what is accepted today as Cummington history today.

Other useful newspaper collections for this project included archives for the Northampton-based *Hampshire Gazette* and the Boston-based suffrage paper, *The Woman's*

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<sup>193</sup> William W. Streeter and Allen Berrien, *Only One Cummington, Volume II* (Cummington, Massachusetts: Cummington Historical Commission, 2008), 440-441.

*Journal*. In addition, books written about the period of Henrietta's lifetime, 1840 to 1924, have been helpful in reconstructing her life, the lives of those whom she was closest to, and the culture of Cummington at that time. Also, the University of Massachusetts library holds helpful records of Massachusetts legislation including petitions which allowed me to identify Fanny as a leader in several woman suffrage petition drives.

Unfortunately, none of the existing sources provide any insight into Henrietta's personality. There are no diaries or letters chronicling her activities or feelings about them. There are no letters between her and Fanny or between any members of their family. We can only conjecture from the facts of her life as to how she came to work for suffrage and the way her family, relatives and townspeople supported or disparaged the work that she engaged in Cummington for nearly two decades. As William Cullen Bryant — arguably Henrietta S. Nahmer's mentor — once told her, “no two witnesses of anything that has happened wholly agree in their representation of it. All that we can do is to adopt what seems most probable.”<sup>194</sup> This essay recounts the probable story of Henrietta S. Nahmer and her work to persuade at least some of her family, neighbors, and townspeople to support the cause of woman suffrage. Through her life story, we can briefly imagine the life and landscape of an intellectually ambitious woman in nineteenth-century Cummington. At the same time, this story of a rank-and-file suffragist in rural western Massachusetts adds another small piece to the history of the woman suffrage movement in Massachusetts. The possible contribution this story of Henrietta's suffrage activity brings to scholarly understanding of the suffrage movement in Massachusetts will be discussed at the end of the essay.

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<sup>194</sup> Henrietta S. Nahmer, “William Cullen Bryant, Our Poet of Nature, As I Remember Him,” in Benjamin Orange Flower ed., *The Arena* 15 (Boston: Arena Publishing Company, 1896), 28-41.



## Writing about Henrietta

I have written the following essay, “Henrietta S. Nahmer and the Pursuit of Woman Suffrage in Cummington, Massachusetts” in a language and style that is suitable for an educated reader rather than for a scholarly journal. For that reason, I have avoided references to scholarly works in the main text, instead relegating them to endnotes, and I have likewise eschewed scholarly debate. For example, I purposely omit scholarly disagreement surrounding the rivalry between Lucy Stone’s American Woman Suffrage Association and Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s National Woman Suffrage Association. Likewise, while I do believe that the story of Henrietta’s suffrage work in Cummington is a promising case study of suffrage activity by a “rank-and-file” activist that contributes to historians’ general understanding of suffrage, I have not sufficiently researched her work or that of area suffragists to propose a reinterpretation or confirmation of any paradigm of the suffrage movement.

Nonetheless, the essay that follows is filled with detail, with extensive attention to the mechanics of the organizational strategy of the state and local suffrage associations. The particulars of the suffrage strategy are fundamental to an assessment of the extent to which Henrietta Nahmer’s actions for suffrage were connected to the state associations. However, ideally, the future published version of Henrietta’s story will incorporate the most important aspects of those mechanics without weighing down the narrative.

The next stage of the writing process of this local history is to hold some public history workshops centered on the essay drafts. Styled on the Five College History Seminar, but geared for interested community members rather than professors, the workshops will offer an opportunity to learn about, discuss and provide feedback on the essays, which will be available in advance. In this way I will receive commentary on my work in progress from the intended audience. At the same time I will be creating an opportunity for interested community members

to actively engage in town history. The final piece will be to incorporate the feedback into a published narrative of Henrietta S. Nahmer and the woman suffrage movement in Cummington.

### A Brief Overview of the Struggle for Woman Suffrage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

Because the principal theme of the following essay is the suffrage movement, I will provide the following summary of the woman suffrage movement in an inset box preceding the narrative.

To the modern citizen of the United States in which all citizens regardless of gender or race have the right to vote, the struggle for suffrage may seem remote and unimportant. By contrast, for much of our country's history, the right to vote was considered a valuable and fundamental right of democracy. One of the principal reasons for the American Revolution was the protest against "taxation without representation." Many colonists felt it was not just to pay taxes to and be governed by England without fair representation. The men who wrote the American Constitution in 1787 designed a representative form a government in which those who governed were theoretically elected by the people who were governed. However, in reality, many of the governed were excluded from voting for the nation's first 150 years.

For much of the eighteenth, nineteenth and part of the twentieth centuries, different classes of voters, including women, many black males, Native Americans, and white men who did not own property, were denied the right to vote. Because the Constitution did not explicitly say who could vote, voting rules were determined by the individual states. The only state to authorize women to vote in the new Republic was New Jersey and that right was rescinded in 1807.<sup>195</sup> A married woman, as under English Law, was legally considered to be a *feme covert*. That meant that married women were legally merged with their husbands upon marriage. Under

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<sup>195</sup> Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention* (Champaign, Il., 2004), 138.

this system a married woman was unable to own property including property she owned before marriage, wages she had earned, and her own personal effects such as her clothes. In addition, she was not allowed to inherit anything from her husband upon his death, to enter into contracts without his consent, to sue or be sued, to have right of custody over children or obtain a divorce, or to testify in a court. Finally, women were denied the right to vote, a means by which they might have been able to challenge some of these laws.<sup>196</sup> It should be noted that these laws were the established custom of the time, and as such were not necessarily considered unjust by most women. There were various loopholes for individual women as well.<sup>197</sup>

Meanwhile, in most states in the first years of the Republic only white men who owned property were allowed to vote, a decision that perpetuated an elite system of property owners controlling national and state affairs. In the 1820s and 1830s the right to vote expanded to include almost all white males including those without property. In a few northern states, free black men were technically allowed to vote. However literacy requirements and property laws in some states effectively excluded most black males.

During the years before the Civil War, some women began to speak publicly for the right to vote. In informal public meetings in the late 1840s in Philadelphia, at women's rights conventions dating back to Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, and Salem, Ohio in 1859, women began to demand the right to vote. Many considered the demand for suffrage radical, and others ridiculed it in the press. But some women were determined to pursue suffrage and other rights including divorce reform and property rights. Women activists held a national woman suffrage convention nearly every year in the 1850s. With the campaign to end slavery well underway in the 1840s and 1850s, some female lecturers on the antislavery speaking circuit including Susan B.

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<sup>196</sup> Sally Gregory McMillan, *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women's Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19.

<sup>197</sup> Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience: A Concise History*, 4th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 189-90.

Anthony and Lucy Stone began advocating for equal rights for all — both the slaves' and women's.<sup>198</sup>

In 1865 after the Civil War ended and slaves were emancipated, men and women antislavery and women's rights advocates rallied for an amendment that would guarantee all black men and all women equal rights as citizens, including the right to vote. However, the Republican white males in power chose to ensure only the rights of black men in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments. White and black women were divided as to whether or not to support an amendment that granted equal rights to black men, but none to women. Ultimately, the majority of black and white activists, including white leaders Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, Abby Foster, and black leaders Frederick Douglas, Sojourner Truth and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, supported the amendments with the hope that a 16<sup>th</sup> amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote would soon follow. A few other former abolitionists, including Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, chose to fight against the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment on the ground that it denied women the full rights to citizenship. Because of this disagreement, Anthony and Stanton decided to form their own woman suffrage organization with their supporters, and Stone and Blackwell did the same.

This division within the leadership of the women's rights movement lasted over twenty years. The National Woman Suffrage Association under Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton was based in New York. The American Woman Suffrage Association led by the husband and wife team of Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell settled in Boston working on suffrage campaigns around the country, but also focusing on establishing suffrage networks in New

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 191-195.

England and Massachusetts.<sup>199</sup> It is here that organizing for suffrage in the small town of Cummington, Massachusetts becomes part of the state and national history of suffrage.

## **Henrietta S. Nahmer and the Pursuit of Woman Suffrage in Cummington,**

### **Massachusetts**

#### Family

Henrietta Smith Rogers was born in Cummington, Massachusetts on March 3, 1841, the oldest of four daughters.<sup>200</sup> Her father, Joseph Rogers, grew up in Lenox, Massachusetts, about twenty-five miles from Cummington in the heart of the Berkshire hills. Little is known about his childhood beyond that he was studious— he was purported to have studied Latin conjugations by the light of the knot fire in the fireplace. By the 1820s he was a teacher in Peru, Massachusetts, a small hilltown located between Cummington and Lenox.<sup>201</sup> In 1826 he married Onah Geer.<sup>202</sup>

During their marriage Joseph and Onah experienced over a decade of trials that may have contributed to Joseph's dour countenance later recollected by his daughters. The couple lost a child, Edward, in January of 1830 while still living in Peru and had another baby, named David.

<sup>203</sup> The family moved to Cummington around 1834 where they bought a house and land on— ironically— Trouble Street.<sup>204</sup> The move did not alleviate their suffering. David died in 1835 and

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<sup>199</sup> McMillan, *Seneca Falls*, 149-185.

<sup>200</sup> Streeter and Morris, *Vital Records*, 65.

<sup>201</sup> Clementina Dawes Nahmer to DeEtte Rogers Abbott, 28 April 1938, Nahmer Family File, Cummington Historical Commission Archive.

<sup>202</sup> Henry Ernest Woods, ed., *Vital Records of Peru, Massachusetts to the Year 1850* (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1902), 70.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 41, 109.

<sup>204</sup> Foster and Streeter, *Only One Cummington*, 364.

their last child died at age three in 1838. Finally, in November of 1839, Joseph Rogers' wife, Onah Rogers, died at the age of 31, leaving Joseph Rogers bereft of a wife and children.<sup>205</sup>

Henrietta's mother, Sophronia Otis Dawes, descended from one of Cummington's pioneering and, therefore, prominent families. Born in Cummington on March 18, 1812, she was the third of seven children (Sally, Louisa, Sophronia and Lucretia were followed by Henry, Francis and Thomas<sup>206</sup>). Sophronia's father was a farmer as well as a furniture maker whose work included making coffins.<sup>207</sup> Like many New England farm families in the 1810s and 1820s, the Dawes family was cash poor but valued education highly. As Sophronia later recalled, "We were very poor but we always had plenty of reading...I suffered with cold and hunger and from the time I was born until I grew up did not have such a good pair of shoes as that!...and there was no room for fun. It was hand-to-hand struggle with poverty. But we were a very happy family."<sup>208</sup> The Dawes family was very religious, but not dogmatic. Tolerance was valued and expected. Their family motto was, "I know not what record of sin awaits me in the other world, but this I know, I was never mean enough to despise any man because he was poor, because he was ignorant or because he was black." Sophronia recalled the family never turned away beggars seeking food or shelter.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Streeter and Morris, *Vital Records*, 224.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>207</sup> Henrietta S. Nahmer, "A Forefather's Hamlet, One Hundred Years Ago: The Group of Buildings Dominated by the Yellow Meeting House- Simple Family Life in the Cabinetmaker's Home," *Springfield Republican*, 3 May 1914.

<sup>208</sup> Clementina Nahmer, "Lecture and Notes of Clementina Nahmer, Chapter of King's Daughters" (paper presented in Bradford, New Hampshire, n.d. [1935]), Nahmer Family file, Cummington Historical Commission Archive.

<sup>209</sup> H.S. Nahmer, "A Forefather's Hamlet."

After primary school, Sophronia and at least four of her brothers and sisters attended the Cummington Academy, which provided from secondary level to college level education.<sup>210</sup> Advanced education was a sacrifice for a farm family at the time. In addition to paying tuition, the families lost valuable laborers at home. While two of her brothers went onto attend college, none of the Dawes girls did. At age sixteen in 1828 Sophronia was teaching school, most likely at one of the village district primary schools.<sup>211</sup>

As the year 1839 came to a close, Sophronia was the only Dawes sister who had not married. (Sally had died at seventeen in 1824). In 1834 her older sister, Louisa, married the Cummington Academy instructor, Thomas Rawson, and moved to New York state, while her younger sister, Lucretia, married Isaac Williams of Cummington in 1835.<sup>212</sup> At age twenty-eight, the family may have assumed Sophronia would end up a spinster as most women at the time married in their early twenties.<sup>213</sup>

While they might have wished her to marry, the Dawes clan was not prepared for Sophronia's engagement and marriage to Joseph Rogers in March 1840, just four months after Onah Geer died. Still living with her family on Potash Hill Road near the church, Sophronia would have met Joseph and Onah Rogers when they moved to Cummington in 1834. The families

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<sup>210</sup> "Catalogue of the officers and students in the academy at Cummington, Massachusetts," February, 1831, Academy file, Cummington Historical Commission Archive. Academies offered a range of educational offerings from the equivalent of high school to the equivalent to the early years of college, depending on the needs and abilities of individual students and the qualifications of the teachers. For more information on academies, see Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) and Joseph Kett, *The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties: From Self-Improvement to Adult Education in America 1750-1990* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>211</sup> Clementina Dawes Nahmer, "Life in Old New England: Of home life a century ago: What Women Did When There Were No Movies, Bridge Parties and Clubs." (n.p., n.d.) Henrietta S. Nahmer Collection, Special Collections, The Jones Library, Amherst, Massachusetts.

<sup>212</sup> Streeter and Morris, *Vital Records*, 188, 111.

<sup>213</sup> Thomas Dublin, *From Farm to Factory: Women's Letters: 1830-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 32.

attended the same church. Certainly Sophronia would have been keenly aware of the recent death of his children and of his wife.

The Dawes family was upset and shocked by the “hastiness of the marriage.”<sup>214</sup> After all, Onah Geer did not leave any children in need of a mother. They also may have been surprised by Sophronia’s choice. While Joseph Rogers lived in their general neighborhood and was a member of their church, there is no indication the older man was an intimate of the Dawes clan or that he came to be over the years.

The Dawes family may have noted Joseph Roger’s rigid personality and questioned his Calvinistic zealotry. He wrote “love” letters to Sophronia that were mostly religious tracts urging repentance and obedience to God.<sup>215</sup> They may also have found Joseph cold and overly serious, unlike the warm family that had nurtured her. Of course the series of losses he had experienced during the previous decade may have intensified his severe character and his religious fervor.

For her part, we do not know whether a desperately single Sophronia jumped at the opportunity to marry any man without much care for who he was. As a spinster in Cummington in 1840, Sophronia was looking at a future forever dependent on her kin for her livelihood. Few single women could or did live alone at that time — especially in rural areas where people still depended on family units and kinship relationships to survive the hard winters. Professions such as teaching provided women merely supplemental incomes — certainly not enough to support a household. Such a choice, if possible for a woman with little money, would be highly unconventional in a small town where everyone knew each other’s business. Life as single women in a family household was arduous without any of the benefits of an independent

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<sup>214</sup> “The haste of their marriage greatly distressed my grandmother’s family.” Clementina Dawes Nahmer to DeEtte Rogers Abbott, 28 April 1938. Nahmer Family File, Cummington Historical Commission Archive.

<sup>215</sup> Joseph Rogers to Sophronia Dawes, u.d. Henrietta S. Nahmer Collection, Jones Library, Amherst.



household that marriage might provide. In addition to the endless chores of cooking, cleaning, sewing, laundry, baking, preserving food, unmarried women might also bring in supplemental income through teaching or side work, e.g. raising chickens to sell eggs or braiding hats. In addition single women were also expected to care for elderly parents and at times were sent to help relatives who needed help with chores, illness or childbirth. The Panic of 1837 would only have amplified any feelings of vulnerability or dependence.<sup>216</sup>

On the other hand, perhaps she simply fell in love: a sympathetic Sophronia opened her heart to the grieving widower. Either way, the couple was married in Cummington on March 25, 1840. While her family (and later her children and grandchildren) perceived this as a less than perfect union, with the fault always lying with the father, the marriage endured until Joseph Rogers' death in 1883.

A year after they were married, in March, 1841, the couple's first daughter, Henrietta Smith Rogers, was born. In the decade that followed Henrietta was joined by three sisters: Julia in 1843, Alice in 1846, and Fanny in 1849.<sup>217</sup> Thirty years later, two of these sisters, Henrietta—now Mrs. H.S. Nahmer— and her sister, Fanny L. Rogers, together organized the suffrage convention.

## Childhood

Henrietta and her sisters spent their childhood in Cummington. In the 1840s the family moved from Trouble Street to a farmhouse on Potash Hill Road across from the Congregational church and a short walk from Sophronia's parents. The Rogers' new house was large and

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<sup>216</sup> Catherine E. Kelly, *In the New England Fashion: Reshaping Women's Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 23-69.

<sup>217</sup> Streeter and Morris, *Vital Records*, 65.

comfortable by Cummington standards, set up on Cummington Hill with views to the North of the rolling hills of Cummington and Plainfield.

Still, by the time Henrietta was born in 1841, Cummington Hill and the Congregational Church were no longer considered Cummington center. As in many New England villages, Cummington's town center had shifted from the hills that had suited the earliest settlers to the valleys where entrepreneurs took advantage of the river power to build mills. By 1840, with its population at an all-time peak of 1261, Cummington was still the thriving manufacturing community that it had been for over a quarter century. As of 1845, there were four tanneries tanning 21,500 hides employing 34 people; seven saw mills employing twenty people; at least one whetstone factory employing fifteen people making scythe stones (or whetstones). Other manufactured products included broom handles (25,000), palm leaf hats (11,000), boots (515 pairs), shoes (725 pairs), two woolen mills producing 13,000 yards of satinet. Blacksmiths and Ironworkers produced hoes, shovels, shears, plows, cultivators, harrows as well as brass and iron kettles, and axes. Agriculturally, there were 4169 merino wool sheep making 11,729 pounds of wool, most of it used in the woolen mills. There were also 922 cattle, whose milk was converted into 30,105 pounds of butter and 25,650 pounds of cheese were made. The community also collectively produced 19,659 pounds of maple sugar and 15,090 pounds of potatoes.<sup>218</sup> These entrepreneurs along with prominent farm families funded and fostered the co-educational academy that was located on Main Street in Cummington. An academy in the center of a town was a symbol of a town's prosperity and progress. Sons studied to prepare for nonagricultural professions or to be scientific farmers. Girls were educated to be good wives who could converse

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<sup>218</sup> Streeter and Allen Berrien, *Only One Cummington*, 263-264.

with husbands, mothers who could educate her children, and increasingly, teachers. For all, education meant being a responsible enlightened citizen of a republic.<sup>219</sup>

Henrietta's father made a comfortable living by Cummington standards for his family, primarily as a farmer. Sometimes, as in the 1840s, he worked as a teacher in Williamsburg.<sup>220</sup> Not having any sons, Joseph Rogers would have relied on hired help or male relatives to help with the cultivation and harvest of crops, maintenance and sheering of sheep, cutting and storage of wood as well as regular farm maintenance. Henrietta and her sisters would have helped her mother take care of the housework. This included daily cooking and cleaning, weekly laundering and baking, seasonally preserving food, and sewing year round. In winter they needed to keep the parlor stoves and wood stoves burning.<sup>221</sup> Henrietta also helped her mother take care of the kitchen garden, the chickens and the cows, as well as making cheese and butter. Like most girls of her generation, Henrietta would have learned to sew at a young age. While her mother no longer spun thread from flax on a spinning wheel and wove it later into cloth, she probably bought fabric at a local store, which she cut and then made into clothes.<sup>222</sup> Her more affluent neighbors had their clothes cut and made in the latest London fashion at ED Eton's store on Main Street in Cummington.<sup>223</sup> The Rogers women may have bought an occasional hat at

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<sup>219</sup> Joseph P. Kett, *The Pursuit of Knowledge*. This drive for self-improvement through knowledge was a thread that wove throughout late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Across the new country, and especially in New England, men (and to a lesser extent women) who were inspired not only to educate themselves and their families, but also the communities in which they lived established an unprecedented number of intellectual institutions and organizations including colleges, academies, libraries, and lyceums. Not mandated by any state or federal regulations, these institutions were the result of the individual effort of local individuals, often in concert with town, clerical, governmental and business leaders.

<sup>220</sup> Clementina D. Nahmer to Charles R. Green, 27 June 1939. Henrietta S. Nahmer Collection, Jones Library, Amherst.

<sup>221</sup> Streeter and Berrien, *Only One Cummington, II*, 250. By the 1840s many families had replaced large fireplaces with cook stoves and parlor stoves.

<sup>222</sup> Thomas Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), 29.

<sup>223</sup> *Hampshire Gazette*, 3 October 1843.

Cummington's S. Burgess and M. Hartwell's Millinery and Dressmaking though it is also possible that Sophronia taught the girls how to braid their own hats.<sup>224</sup>

As in many Cummington families the church was an important force in the Rogers' household. As of 1840 the town sported three Congregational churches as well as several other Protestant denominations, including a Baptist Church, a Universalist church, a Methodist Episcopal church, the Latter Day Saints and a Unitarian church.<sup>225</sup> The Rogers family attended the original Congregational church that was located conveniently across the street from their house. Henrietta's mother Sophronia was religious, but was known to smile behind a serious minister's back. By contrast their father, a Deacon in the church, made sure his family observed strict religious ritual. The Rogers family respected the Sabbath from sundown Saturday night to sundown Sunday night "doing extreme penance."<sup>226</sup> This meant that at the very least Henrietta and her sisters were not allowed to play from Saturday sundown to Sunday sundown. They attended one church service and possibly two. Yet church days were not all bad. Often there was a noonday meal in between services when families would socialize.

According to recollections of his granddaughter, Joseph Rogers' religious rigidity extended into his role as a father. Rogers was strict and not given to expressing affection. This created a distance between him and his girls, one which he regretted in later life but never breeched. On the other hand the girls were very close and devoted to their intelligent, kind,

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<sup>224</sup> *Hampshire Gazette*, 26 May 1841.

<sup>225</sup> Foster and Streeter, *Only One Cummington*, 401–402.

<sup>226</sup> Henrietta S. Nahmer, "That's for Remembrance: Glimpses of Old New England." *Boyhood and Girlhood Pleasures in Playtime and School hours — the spelling match and the dramatics.* (u.d., u.p.) Henrietta S. Nahmer Collection, Jones Library, Amherst.

hardworking mother.<sup>227</sup> Many years later both parents would show support for Henrietta in her suffrage work.

Henrietta and her sisters delighted in the typical pastimes of a country childhood. The Rogers children were close friends with their neighbors, the family of James Chapman, their new minister. The Chapmans had eight children, with the youngest three girls of similar in age to the Rogers girls.<sup>228</sup> In contrast to their own strict father, the Reverend James Chapman was a kind, gentle man. Henrietta also joined a singing school, a popular social activity for boys and girls, and loved sleigh rides at night. Henrietta and her sisters rambled through the forests and fields surrounding their home. With their uncles and aunts and cousins, the Rogers children participated in barn raisings, dances and harvest suppers.<sup>229</sup>

Henrietta and her sisters also enjoyed some of the status conferred on members of the Dawes family. In addition to being descendants of early settlers in Cummington, the Dawes offspring, particularly Henrietta's uncles, brought prestige to the family. Henrietta's prominent and eccentric uncle, Francis H. Dawes, was an intellectual, self-taught lawyer, and Justice of the Peace. Another uncle was a doctor in Saugerties, New York. Her uncle Henry Laurent Dawes, a Yale graduate, was elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1857, a career that lasted until 1875 when he became a United States Senator. William Cullen Bryant, Henrietta's most famous connection, was related to the Dawes family by marriage: Henrietta's uncle Francis Dawes' wife Melissa Everett Dawes was the sister of Bryant's brother Cyrus' wife, Julia Everett Bryant. Henrietta along with most longtime Cummington residents watched with pride as Bryant

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<sup>227</sup> Clementina D. Nahmer to DeEtte Rogers Abbott, 28 April 1938, Nahmer Family File, Cummington Historical Commission Archive. In that letter, Clementina reports that Sophronia purportedly once told her daughters, "your father woke me up in the middle of the night, weeping because his children did not love him...No matter what he has done in the past he loved his children more than they loved him."

<sup>228</sup> Streeter and Morris, *Vital Records*, 281.

<sup>229</sup> H.S. Nahmer, "Glimpses of Old New England."

ascended to national fame and prominence as a poet and newspaper editor during the 1850s.<sup>230</sup> For Henrietta, family status was achieved through intellectual and political accomplishments rather than monetary means. These would remain important to her throughout her life.

During Henrietta's childhood, the passions of the abolitionist movement swirled around her. Before he came to Cummington in 1843, their neighbor and minister, Yale educated Reverend Chapman, and his family had fled their home in Wolcott, Connecticut after his church was burned down because of his support for abolition. Henrietta's father, aunt other relatives signed antislavery petitions to the United States House of Representatives. When antislavery and woman's rights speaker Lucy Stone came to speak in Cummington in 1850, a disappointed nine year-old Henrietta was not allowed to attend the talk or the following picnic because her parents wanted to protect her from the catcalls or worse of townspeople hostile to the cause (as well as, perhaps, to the idea of woman speaking in public). While there is no hard evidence that the Rogers family sheltered fugitive slaves, it was said that during the years preceding the Civil War the fields around the Rogers' house were "black," in a reference to the presence of fugitive slaves.<sup>231</sup> Twelve year-old Henrietta may have known that her Uncle Francis Dawes and her Aunt Melissa participated in the Underground Railroad harboring escaped slaves. Certainly she knew that this same uncle and aunt were excommunicated with five others from the Congregational Church in Cummington Village in 1854 for their abolitionist stances. She also knew they had set up an alternative antislavery church.<sup>232</sup> Henrietta may have gone to annual antislavery conventions held in Cummington from 1854 to 1862, attended by such luminaries as

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<sup>230</sup> William Cullen Bryant was the publisher of New York's *Evening Post*, an early supporter of Abraham Lincoln, and an important voice in the construction of the newly established Republican Party.

<sup>231</sup> William W. Streeter, conversation with author, Cummington, Mass., 8 June 2006.

<sup>232</sup> Melissa Everett Dawes to Wilbur Siebert, 5 August 1896. Wilbur H. Siebert Collection Microfilm Edition, MIC 192, The Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.

William Lloyd Garrison, Parker Pillsbury, and Sojourner Truth, among others. People she loved and respected struggled publicly for an unpopular and controversial but just cause.<sup>233</sup>

Early on, Henrietta learned that some activities were limited to boys and others for girls. On snowy days in winter in the 1840s, only boys were allowed to ice skate and have snow ball fights. Girls could ride on sleds pulled by boys. In the end of the year school play (the only time theater was allowed) boys got to put on heroic productions with Indians and warriors in contrast to the subdued demure productions of the girls.<sup>234</sup>

As a younger child, Henrietta attended her local primary school, the Bryant school, or district School #7. By the time she was in school in the 1840s, the literacy rate in New England had reached 90%. Girls received the same primary education as boys.<sup>235</sup> As was typical of the time, the school was open for two three-month sessions in the summer and winter. Henrietta played games in the bucolic schoolyard, such as “Polly-catcher” and “Queen Ann, Queen Ann, who sits in the sun.” Henrietta borrowed books including “Rolo Books” and the *Tales of Miss Edgeworth* from the school library, at that time a small bookcase in the district #7 schoolhouse. She also enjoyed participating in spelling matches against other Cummington districts and against other towns.<sup>236</sup>

Although Cummington’s Academy had closed by the time she was eligible, for at least the year 1856, Henrietta attended a select school in Plainfield. The school was open for a three-

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<sup>233</sup> Streeter and Berrien, *Only One Cummington, Volume II*.

<sup>234</sup> H.S. Nahmer, “Glimpses of Old New England.”

<sup>235</sup> Woloch, *Women*, 130.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid*; In William Wells Newell, *Games and Songs of American Children* (New York: Harper and Brothers 1884), 151, Newell explains the game: ‘Queen Ann who sits in the sun’ is a guessing game. A girl is placed in the center of a circle of children one of whom secretly hides a ball. The rings says:

Queen Anne, Queen Anne, you sit in the sun/As fair as a lily, as brown as a bun/ The king sends you three letters and bids you read one/ I cannot read one Unless I read all/ So pray, Miss or Master, deliver the ball.

If she says the right name of the person she gets out of the circle. If not, then she continues until she does.

month session in the summer and another in winter. One term, Henrietta was taught by S.C. Pixley, a Plainfield native who had just graduated from Williams College and soon after became a missionary in South Africa. Bookish by nature, Henrietta was once thrilled to receive a gorgeous blue and gold copy of a text called “Night Thoughts”— a book-length poem written in 1742 by British poet Edward Young illustrated by William Blake— while the rest of the class simply used their family’s well-worn leather copies. Yet she also enjoyed more common gaieties. When the select school was overcrowded, girls were required to sit opposite the boys and use a common bench as a desk which she found “great fun and not usually done in school.”<sup>237</sup>

Intellectually ambitious, at select school Henrietta readily learned that boys were educated towards an intellectual future closed to her. While she and another small group of girls sat in the front, in the back were a group of boys whom she privately called “the giants.” How she envied “ones of the back seats in the path which leads to the classic founts of learning, to share with them in the Hellenic feat.” By contrast, hers was “a gaze that sought an impossible future.”<sup>238</sup> Henrietta was part of a growing number of young women who longed for educational and career opportunities comparable to that of young men. While there were increasing numbers of seminaries and finishing schools that provided some higher education such as Mount Holyoke Seminary in Hadley, Massachusetts and Troy Female Seminary in Troy, New York, in 1860 Oberlin was the only college to award women degrees alongside men.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Charles N. Dyer, *History of the Town of Plainfield, Hampshire County, MA, From its Settlement to 1891* (Northampton, Mass.: Press of Gazette Printing Co., 1891), 96-97; Henrietta S. Nahmer, “Autumn School of Long Ago: Taught by an Afterward Veteran Missionary,” *Springfield Republican*, 2 April 1914; H.S. Nahmer, “Glimpses of Old New England.”

<sup>238</sup> H.S. Nahmer, “Glimpses of Old New England.”

<sup>239</sup> Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Woman’s Associations in American History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 117.



## Leaving Cummington

Like the “giants” she went to school with, sometime in the late 1850s or early 1860s Henrietta left Cummington to undertake an advanced course of study. Although the name of the institution where she studied is lost to history, she was later said to possess “superior literary qualification.”<sup>240</sup> She most likely attended a female seminary or academy or teachers college, possibly in New York State.

Even if Henrietta attended a women’s college with a curriculum comparable to a men’s college, there were limited options for applying these skills to an intellectually satisfying career. Most rural women of her generation planned to and would get married. In the meantime, many who did not come from affluence supplemented their family’s income through paid work. Working in a factory, as a milliner, or as a domestic servant would be considered demeaning to a young woman of Henrietta’s background and educational attainment. At the same time, becoming a successful writer like Harriet Beecher Stowe or a lecturer like Susan B. Anthony, which still challenged taboos against women public speakers, may have seemed daunting.

Rather, Henrietta, like most young educated women in the mid-nineteenth century, chose teaching. In choosing teaching as a career, Henrietta selected the most common acceptable wage-earning profession for rural white middle-class women at the time. In contrast to the beginning of the nineteenth century when most teachers were men, by 1860, 84% of teachers in New England (and 65-80% nationally) were women and nearly a quarter of all New England women had taught at some point in their lives. By 1870 over 90% of professional women were teachers while 3% were office workers.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> 1867-68 Annual Report of the School Committee of the Town of Cummington, Massachusetts, Cummington Town Records, Office of the Town Clerk, Cummington, Massachusetts.

<sup>241</sup> Mary Kelley, *Learning*, 10; Dublin, *Transforming Women’s Work*, 207; Woloch, Nancy, *Women*, 252. The authors explain that the shift of the teaching profession from mostly males to mostly females was the result of a combination of factors including a high rate of literacy among girls and boys, an ideology that

By the early 1860's, Henrietta was living and teaching in Rochester, New York, nearly 300 miles away from her native Cummington and, in many ways, another world. At the time, Rochester had a population of 48,000. Known as the "flower city" because of its horticultural industry, it was then larger than Chicago, Detroit or Cleveland.<sup>242</sup> In Rochester, Henrietta had unprecedented access to books and lectures and contact with a wide variety of people. As in her hometown of Cummington, Rochester women were actively engaged in abolition activities, as well as temperance and other moral reform activities, but on a much wider scale.<sup>243</sup> While in Rochester, Henrietta once attended a lecture by Susan B. Anthony advocating woman suffrage and equal rights. However, at the age of twenty or so, "young and inexperienced," as Henrietta later described her younger self, she was not then interested in the struggle for women's rights, nor would it appear, was she interested in struggling for abolition.<sup>244</sup>

Like most of the nation, Henrietta was probably preoccupied by the deteriorating state of the nation in the early 1860s. After years of tension, in January 1861, eleven states in the South seceded from the Union and were later joined by four more. The July Union defeat by the Confederate Army at the Battle of Bull Run indicated that the war would not end quickly. Soldiers from Rochester were among the casualties from the beginning. Hundreds of young men,

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held that women's innate morality made them better teachers than men, the movement of male of teachers away from teaching jobs into higher paying white collar jobs in newly developing urban areas, and finally the fact that districts could save money by hiring female teachers whom they paid less than their male counterparts. After the Civil War women began to make significant inroads into other professions such as nursing, librarianship, and clerical work. A few women broke into fields that were considered inflexibly male: medicine, law, ministry, business leadership, but these remained male-dominated well into the next century.

<sup>242</sup> "Rochester's History- An Illustrated Timeline The Flower City 1850-1899," (accessed 1 June 2009), available from <http://www.vintageviews.org/vv-tl/timeline/flower.html>.

<sup>243</sup> For more information on women's activism in Rochester at that time, see Nancy Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984).

<sup>244</sup> Henrietta, S. Nahmer, "A Tribute to Susan B. Anthony: Her Life and Her Great Work: Some Recollections of the Appearances Upon Platform and in Private Life," *The Springfield Republican* (n.d.), Henrietta S. Nahmer Collection, Jones Library, Amherst.

potential partners for young women like Henrietta, left for war and men and women left behind set up relief services. It is not known if Henrietta contributed to any relief operations.<sup>245</sup>

In 1861 or 1862 Henrietta's life took a new direction. She met and married Adolphus von der Nahmer. Born in Siegen, Germany, in 1821 and twenty years older than Henrietta, Adolphus was a political refugee from Germany. He had been involved with the March Revolution in 1848 in Prussia, when revolutionaries protested and demanded that the Emperor create a more democratic government. Many involved in the revolution were executed or imprisoned. Some, as in the case of Adolphus von der Nahmer, escaped to the United States and became political refugees. Descended from nobility, Nahmer was well educated (referred to as Dr.) and worked as a teacher.<sup>246</sup> Henrietta may have met Adolphus while studying or at the school where she was teaching. He may have seemed sophisticated, mature and exciting, compared to the boys she sat across from in school in her hometown in Cummington.

Like her mother's marriage a generation before, twenty-one year-old Henrietta's marriage to this unknown German man old enough to be her father must have surprised and shocked the family. The couple married on January 4, 1863, just two weeks after her sister Julia married Henry Kingman, a young, respectable Cummington man.<sup>247</sup> But Henrietta's family did not have much time to dwell on her unlikely match. Her sixteen-year old sister, Alice, was very sick with tuberculosis. Alice went to live and receive treatment from her physician uncle in

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<sup>245</sup> "Rochester's History."

<sup>246</sup> Clementina D. Nahmer to Charles Green, 13 September 1939. Nahmer family file. Cummington Historical Commission Archive.

<sup>247</sup> Office of the Registrar General, National Society Daughters of the American Revolution, Membership Application of Clementina S. Nahmer (255048) on Benjamin Burgess (1737-1807), Massachusetts, Washington, D.C., August 13, 1929. DAR Library, Washington, D.C.

Saugerties, New York, where she died in May 1863. She was buried in the Dawes cemetery in Cummington.<sup>248</sup>

Meanwhile, Henrietta and Adolphus chose to make their home in Rochester. Like most newly married women, Henrietta probably gave up her teaching job. Before long another life-changing event occurred. A year after her marriage, in 1864, Henrietta gave birth to her first child, Henry S. Von der Nahmer. A year later she had another baby, this time a girl, Frances Clementina Von Der Nahmer.<sup>249</sup>

### Back to Cummington

Living in a city on one teacher's income, most likely in a small rented dwelling with two babies and no family to help out, was probably a challenge for Henrietta and Adolphus. In addition to caring for two babies, Henrietta did all the housework including, laundry by hand. And as a respectable middle-class woman, she had to do it, as one author put it, without it looking like it took any effort.<sup>250</sup> It must have been quite a different life than the one she had imagined when she first left Cummington. The city had other problems as well. In March 1865 there was an enormous flood in Rochester that lasted from a Friday to a Monday, inflicting one million dollars worth of damage. The devastation was so severe that President Lincoln granted they city an exemption from the draft so men could be used to reconstruct the city. Perhaps the flood damaged their home. It also might have been a challenge for Adolphus to find enough work.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Streeter and Morris, *Vital Records*, 65. It is interesting to note that Henrietta's mother Sophronia lost a 17 year-old sister when she was around Henrietta's age.

<sup>249</sup> Streeter and Morris, *Vital Records*, 303.

<sup>250</sup> Kelly, *In the New England Fashion*, 165.

<sup>251</sup> "Rochester's History."

It was probably some combination of these challenges that led Henrietta and Adolphus, with two babies in tow, to move to Cummington sometime in 1865 or 1866. In 1866, they purchased the “Chapman House” next door to her parents (the minister and his eldest daughter had died in 1854 and the family had recently left) and set up housekeeping there.<sup>252</sup>

This homecoming may have been bittersweet for Henrietta. On the one hand it would have been a relief to have her mother’s support and her married sister’s camaraderie as she raised her children. At the same time, it may have felt like a defeat. She had made it to the big wide world, had become a teacher, married an intellectual, and yet ended up back in Cummington. On the other hand, she and Adolphus may have appreciated the simplicity and fresh air of rural life.

It is not known what Adolphus Nahmer did in Cummington to support his young family. He did not teach in the local schools, perhaps because of his thick German accent. Of noble birth and highly educated, he may have had few practical skills that were necessary to succeed or even just survive the long hard winters. Maybe he tried to farm or find a job in a local factory. It also may have been difficult for Adolphus to adjust to the homogeneous provincialism of Cummington where only a handful of foreigners, mainly Irish, had settled. Henrietta’s extended family and friends may have welcomed him, but tongues certainly wagged in other parts of town.

Perhaps these conditions put an impossible strain on their marriage. By 1868, a third life-changing event occurred in twenty-six year-old Henrietta’s life: Adolphus left Cummington. Their house, formerly in his name, was now owned by Mrs. Henrietta S. Nahmer, the name that Henrietta would use for the rest of her life.<sup>253</sup> Henrietta never divorced Adolphus. She retained

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<sup>252</sup> Town of Cummington tax records (1866), Cummington, Mass.

<sup>253</sup> Town of Cummington tax records (1868), Cummington, Mass.

the status of married woman until his death and called herself a widow after he died in Germany in 1892.<sup>254</sup>

Census records provide the few clues available about Adolphus's life after leaving Cummington. By 1870 Adolphus was working as a teacher and living in a boarding house in the Boston neighborhood of West Roxbury.<sup>255</sup> In 1880 he was teaching near Long Island in New York.<sup>256</sup> Perhaps he sent money to his family when he could. Perhaps his children visited him. Sometime during the next decade Adolphus returned to Germany.<sup>257</sup> It is not known if he ever returned to Cummington to visit his family.

Adolphus's departure rendered Henrietta's life situation even less conventional than it had been previously. First, she had been determined to pursue advanced education outside of Cummington. Then, she had married a foreigner and brought him to Cummington. Now the foreigner was gone, and she was a single mother with two and three-year old children, without the benefits and protections of a husband. No doubt some people said, "That's what all that learning will get you."

In 1867, the separated mother broke another middle class taboo: she, a mother of two small children, got a job. That summer Henrietta taught a twelve-week term in district 7, in charge of the same schoolhouse she had studied in. Henrietta's first teaching evaluation was not flattering. "With an experienced teacher, possessing superior literary qualification, we were led to expect a school of high order, but we must say we were somewhat disappointed. There was a want of interest in the studies pursued, as neither teacher nor scholars seemed to put forth earnest

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<sup>254</sup> Clementina D. Nahmer to Charles Green, 10 Sept 1940. Henrietta S. Nahmer Collection, the Jones Library, Amherst.

<sup>255</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, 1870 census. West Roxbury, Norfolk, Massachusetts.

<sup>256</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1880 census, Babylon, Suffolk, New York.

<sup>257</sup> Clementina Dawes Nahmer to Charles Green, 10 Sept 1940. Henrietta S. Nahmer Collection, Jones Library, Amherst.

effort in their work.” When another teacher, Martha Dawes, took over for the winter term, the school “seemed inspired with new life.”<sup>258</sup>

Henrietta continued to teach over the next several years. Her salary was small. In 1872 she received \$4.37 and ½ in the winter and \$4.55 per week in summer. Henrietta probably knew that in that same year, the male teacher in Cummington received \$8.33 and 1/3 per week for doing the same work.<sup>259</sup>

### Awakening to Suffrage

Perhaps it was during these years of intense change and personal hardship that Henrietta awoke personally to the unequal status of men and women. As a mother of two children without a husband to depend on, she was responsible for supporting her children, yet she was paid less than her male, perhaps unmarried, counterpart. This inequity had spurred on some of the greatest suffrage warriors of her time, including Susan B. Anthony.<sup>260</sup> Henrietta would have been relieved that as a legally married woman she herself had legal control over her own wages due to property acts passed in the 1860s in Massachusetts (though women in some other states would be required to turn their wages over to their husbands for several more decades.) Henrietta also was fortunate that she retained custody of her children, but she may have been aware of how easily their father could have taken them away. As a property-owner with the house in her name, she was required to pay taxes to the town. Yet, as a woman, she was not allowed to vote at town

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<sup>258</sup> Annual Report of the School Committee of the Town of Cummington for 1867-8, Cummington, Mass., 9.

<sup>259</sup> Annual Report of the School Committee of the Town of Cummington for 1872-3, Cummington, Mass., 6-13.

<sup>260</sup> Patricia A. Carter, *Everybody's Paid But the Teacher: The Teaching Profession and the Women's Movement* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 77. Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, and Carrie Chapman Catt all cited teachers' unequal pay as one reason for their involvement in the woman suffrage movement.

meeting about how to allocate the money she was paying. Finally, Henrietta may also have been energized to take action toward achieving woman suffrage through the influence of her youngest sister, Fanny Rogers.

### Henrietta's Sister Fanny L. Rogers and the Suffrage Movement

Eight years Henrietta's junior, Fanny Louisa Rogers was just thirteen when Henrietta and Julia married and her remaining sister Alice died. Like Henrietta, Fanny attended primary school and then the local select or high school and became a teacher. In 1865 at age sixteen she was earning \$6 a week teaching in Cummington.<sup>261</sup> The following year Fanny left to live and study teaching at the State Normal School in Westfield, Massachusetts, twenty-eight hilly miles away from Cummington. The school year consisted of three 14-week terms. Fanny, like all the students, boarded with a private family, paying at least two dollars for a room and washroom plus an extra dollar for use of books and a 50-cent surcharge in winter for fuel and lights. They also had to pay 50 cents a term to use books.<sup>262</sup> Fanny was part of a small but growing population of college educated women. In 1870, 1% of college-age Americans attended college. 21% of these were women.<sup>263</sup>

It appears Fanny first discovered her passion for the suffrage movement while in college. In her college anniversary yearbook she called herself a "suffragist" among classmates who had become librarians, telegraph operators, photographers and physicians.<sup>264</sup> Fanny was not the only teacher in the suffrage movement. In fact, female teachers were the core constituency of suffrage

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<sup>261</sup> Annual Report of the School Committee of the Town of Cummington for 1864-65, 8-9.

<sup>262</sup> Clarence A. Brodeur, "Historical Sketch" in *Alma Mater. Twenty-First Triennial June 1, 1907. State Normal School, Westfield, Mass. 1839 – 1907* (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Co., State Printers, 1907).

<sup>263</sup> Woloch, *Women*, 275.

<sup>264</sup> Robert T. Brown, *The Rise and Fall of the People's Colleges: The Westfield Normal School, 1839 to 1914* (Westfield, Mass.: Institute for Massachusetts Studies, Westfield State College, 1988), 76.



groups. Suffrage organizations liked to recruit teachers because teachers constituted the largest professional group of women. As visible members of their communities, they also were well positioned to convert others to the suffrage cause.<sup>265</sup>

After graduating in 1867, Fanny remained in Westfield for eight years working as teacher. After spending two years teaching in North Adams, Fanny moved to Boston around 1877 where she mostly taught school for the next thirty years. During her first years in Boston, Fanny lived at the newly built Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in the South End on Warrenton Street.<sup>266</sup> The director at the time was Charlotte Drinkwater who had graduated from Westfield Normal School several years before Fanny.<sup>267</sup> Founded in 1866 and serving as a prototype for those that followed, the Boston YWCA was created to oversee the physical and moral welfare of young women, such as Fanny, coming from the country to Boston to work. Fanny most likely ate at the rooming house, where meals were served in the dining hall for an additional fee.<sup>268</sup> The other boarders at the YWCA were all young Christian white-working women. Their professions included clerks, teachers, seamstress, bookkeeper, artist, student, and machine operator. They came from Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont, Nova Scotia, and Canada.<sup>269</sup>

As with Henrietta's venture in Rochester, Fanny's life in Boston was a stark contrast to her hometown of Cummington. Among Boston's population of over 300,000, Fanny had the opportunity to encounter people from all parts of the country, from diverse backgrounds, and

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<sup>265</sup> Carter, *Everybody's Paid*, 77.

<sup>266</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1880 census, Boston, Suffolk, Mass.

<sup>267</sup> Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Flesher Moon, *Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), 156.

<sup>268</sup> Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: gender, space, and power in Boston, 1870-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 19.

<sup>269</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1880 census, Boston, Suffolk, Mass.

engage in a wide variety of activities. In face of all this choice, Fanny focused on teaching, the church, and suffrage. Fanny studied elocution, which she later taught, and she also studied art.<sup>270</sup>

The church was an important part of her life, and Fanny corresponded about spiritual issues with important clergy of the time, including Philip Brooks, a famous Episcopal minister and Bishop for whom she also may have taught Sunday school at the renowned Trinity Church in Copley Square.<sup>271</sup>

Ironically, Fanny's Boston situation afforded her more respect when she came home for the summers. In later decades her comings and goings from Boston were announced in the local Cummington newspaper along with the activities of other prominent summer and local residents. Yet in Boston most likely few cared about the activities of this teacher and boarding house resident.

Boston was an ideal place for Fanny to get further involved in the suffrage movement. It was the home of the Lucy Stone, leader of the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), one of the two major wings of the suffrage movement (the rival National Woman Association (NWSA) was led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony). In addition to organizing, Stone and her husband Henry Blackwell began the *Woman's Journal*, a newspaper that was the principal mouthpiece of the suffrage movement for over fifty years.<sup>272</sup> AWSA shared its Park

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<sup>270</sup> Kate Gannet Wells to Fanny Rogers, (u.d.) Fanny Rogers Papers, Special Collections, Jones Library, Amherst.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid. She also corresponded with the well-known liberal Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke and Edward Everett Hale.

<sup>272</sup> For more information about this split, see Andrea Moore Kerr, *Lucy Stone: Speaking Out for Equality* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992). Together with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Stone founded the American Equal Rights Association to support the rights of women and African Americans. However, after the Civil War, Stone split from Stanton and Anthony when they refused to support the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment that guaranteed male citizens the right to vote regardless of race. While Stanton and Anthony did not want to support a suffrage amendment that did not include women, Stone felt that she would rather support the rights of the freed slaves with hopes of all women soon gaining suffrage rather than betraying the hopes of some of the just freed slaves. Most black women, such as Sojourner Truth and Frances Harper, agreed with Stone. In 1869, Anthony and Stanton formed the

Street headquarters with the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association (MWSA) and the New England Woman Suffrage Association (NEWSA).

Fanny chose to work with groups closely aligned with AWSA and Lucy Stone rather than the NWSA, probably because these groups formed the dominant suffrage organizations in Boston and the state. At the same time, Lucy Stone and the AWSA was probably a better fit for Fanny Rogers than the NWSA. Lucy Stone had grown up on a farm in the small town of West Brookfield, Massachusetts. Like the Rogers sisters, she highly valued education and through sheer perseverance received a higher education at Oberlin College. A staunch abolitionist before Emancipation, she also clearly supported for women's rights. Yet she was not a complete radical. Though she refused to take her husband Henry Blackwell's last name and for a while sported bloomers, by the 1880s she dressed simply and promoted marriage and home. She sought to portray women as "elegant, cultivated, and refined."<sup>273</sup> While Stanton and Anthony made some disreputable connections, including Victoria Woodhull who advocated free love, Stone tried to maintain an aura of respectability, while still upholding the belief of natural equality between men and women. Yet, in reality, the two suffrage groups were not all that different, and it is unclear whether rank and file members such as Fanny Rogers and Henrietta Nahmer, paid much attention to the national rivalries.<sup>274</sup>

In Massachusetts, AWSA presented petitions to pressure members of the state legislature to pass suffrage legislation that would allow women to vote in Massachusetts. Unlike in other states, petitions required annual hearings on a topic and could not be quietly killed in committee. Once a hearing was established, suffragists could pressure specific house and senate members to

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National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and in response Stone formed the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). The rival organizations finally reconciled as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) twenty-one years later in 1890. Stone died in 1893. Women did not get secure the right to vote until 1920 with the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment.

<sup>273</sup> Kerr, *Lucy Stone*, 190.

<sup>274</sup> Scott, *Natural Allies*, 135-138.

support suffrage. Yet by the late 1870s when Fanny moved to Boston, hope was beginning to fade for a quick passage of statewide woman suffrage legislation in Massachusetts. The requirements to pass a constitutional amendment were daunting, requiring approval by two successive legislatures, as well as 2/3 vote in the House each time and a favorable vote in a public referendum.<sup>275</sup>

While suffrage legislation always enjoyed the support of the Massachusetts governor, it was always voted down either in the Senate or the House. Yet there were glimmers of hope. In 1876 and 1877 suffragists came close to passing a Massachusetts state suffrage amendment. When the Massachusetts Senate passed “resolves for a constitutional amendment granting women complete suffrage equality with men,”<sup>276</sup> the same legislation did not pass in the House that year. They would have to begin all over again.

In 1874 Massachusetts suffragists did achieve a small victory. The Massachusetts legislature (Great and General Court) passed the resolution that women were eligible to serve as members of school committees.<sup>277</sup> Until then women were not allowed to sit on any municipal or town board or committee at all in the state. Supporters of the bill convinced legislators that because women were considered innately more moral than men and thus better equipped to serve as teachers, they were also morally better to oversee the schools.

A couple of years after women won the right to serve on a school committee, Abby May, a Boston educator and a cofounder of the New England Woman’s Club, one of the oldest women’s clubs in the nation, did not win her bid for reelection to the Boston School Committee.

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<sup>275</sup> Lois Bannister Merk, *Massachusetts and the Woman Suffrage Movement* (PhD Diss., Harvard University, 1961), 33.

<sup>276</sup> Merk, *Massachusetts*, 11.

<sup>277</sup> Cornelius Dalton, John Wirkkala, and Anne Thomas, *Leading the Way: A History of the Massachusetts General Court 1629-1980* (Boston, Mass.: The General Court, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1984), 170.

As a result, she began an initiative to pass a law allowing women to vote for school committee. She believed that if women voted in school committee elections, more women would be elected to school committee seats. Also, the school committee amendment would be easier to pass than a suffrage amendment, requiring a simple majority rather than the 2/3 required for an amendment.<sup>278</sup>

Fanny Rogers began to volunteer for woman suffrage in the late 1870s when the campaign for school suffrage was in full swing. Perhaps after work or on weekends she attended meetings at the offices located near the Capitol and Boston Common on Park Street. The main organizing was centered on “parlor meetings, pamphlets, speakers, and testimony before legislative committees.”<sup>279</sup> One common volunteer job was circulating petitions. Fanny went house-to-house, perhaps door-to-door in rooming houses, trying to get signatures for petitions to be presented to the legislature. Some petitioners had collected between eight and ten thousand signatures. These petitions were usually presented to the legislature in January.<sup>280</sup>

Surprising to suffrage advocates who had toiled for woman suffrage amendment year in and year out, the bill to allow women the right to vote for school committee was pushed through the legislature in one session in 1879. While suffragists were excited by the relative ease of this victory, many observed that the bill easily passed only because it was supported by prominent members of the New England Women’s Club— women with powerful husbands. In truth, many of the law’s advocates did not support full woman suffrage.<sup>281</sup>

Nonetheless, suffragists at AWSA were encouraged by the relative ease with which the bill was passed. Discouraged by the suffrage defeats in the Massachusetts legislature and

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<sup>278</sup> Merk, *Massachusetts*, 58.

<sup>279</sup> Scott, *Natural Allies*, 139.

<sup>280</sup> Merk, *Massachusetts*, 34.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

nationally of the universal suffrage referendums in Kansas, Michigan and Colorado, Lucy Stone and the AWSA suffrage leaders decided to pursue even smaller steps such as school suffrage and municipal suffrage legislation that could be obtained more easily than a Constitutional amendment.<sup>282</sup> Ultimately, apart from the statewide suffrage achieved in Wyoming in 1869 and Utah in 1870, school suffrage and municipal suffrage were the main concrete victories of the suffrage movement for the twenty-five years after the Civil War (1865–1890).<sup>283</sup>

Ironically, the same ease with which the Massachusetts school suffrage legislation was passed that so heartened suffrage advocates frightened those who opposed woman suffrage — so much so that it inspired the strongest anti-suffrage movement in the country. Alarmed at the success of the suffrage movement, anti-suffragists began to organize and became a formidable state and national movement, funding anti-suffrage campaign all around the country. Well-respected intellectuals of the time, including Richard H. Dana (the editor and close friend of the late William Cullen Bryant), the historian Francis Parkman, and the Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale, all spoke out against suffrage.

In addition, some socially prominent women, such as "Nanny" Cabot Lodge, the wife of Henry Cabot Lodge, also organized actively against suffrage.<sup>284</sup> As well-educated as their suffragist counterparts, these affluent women argued that women belonged in a different sphere from men, caring for the family's domestic affairs and society's moral affairs. Women, in their minds, would best influence society by being good wives and mothers and participating in acceptable charitable and reform organizations. Women's moral superiority and delicate character

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<sup>282</sup> Merk, *Massachusetts*, 54. In Carter, *Everybody's Paid*, 78, the author notes that seven states granted school suffrage before Massachusetts: Kentucky (1838- for widows with small children only), Kansas (1861), Michigan and Minnesota (1875), Colorado (1876), New Hampshire and Oregon (1878). Massachusetts was followed by New York and Vermont (1880), Nebraska (1883), North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Arizona, New Jersey (1887), Illinois (1891), Connecticut (1893), Delaware (1898), Wisconsin (1900), and Oklahoma (1907).

<sup>283</sup> Scott, *Natural Allies*, 138.

<sup>284</sup> Merk, *Massachusetts*, 73, 105.

would be tainted by her participation in the male sphere of electoral politics, rampant as it was with vice and corruption. As a result their homes would suffer and a general societal decline would ensue. Other suffrage opponents portrayed suffragists as polygamists, manly women, or free-love radicals.<sup>285</sup>

But anti-suffragists were not the only obstacles to recruiting women to vote for school suffrage. Some suffragists felt school suffrage was so insignificant that it was not worth voting for at all. In the face of this opposition, the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association embarked on a campaign to educate women about their new right with the help of volunteers like Fanny Rogers. Fanny helped spread the word, gathering signatures, and assisting with new voter registration. At the same time, she probably kept her sister Henrietta abreast of the latest suffrage activity. Back in Cummington, twenty years after she had been a disinterested observer of Susan B. Anthony, Henrietta was eager to join in the suffrage struggle.

#### Preparing for Suffrage Activism: Henrietta S. Nahmer in 1870s and 1880s Cummington

In 1880, Henrietta had been back in Cummington for thirteen years. During these years she must have awakened to the suffrage movement and decided to become directly involved. While there is no indication of a turning point or “conversion moment” in her life, it is possible the conservative, perhaps stifling, culture of Cummington combined with the influence of her activist sister, Fanny Rogers, convinced her to join the movement.

Sometime around 1880, Henrietta and her children, Henry, 16, and Clementina 15, had moved in with her parents, Sophronia and Joseph, who were in their 60s and 70s. It seemed to make more sense to maintain one large house instead of two. The rent Henrietta now earned would help as well. Henrietta left no record of how she felt about living with her parents again,

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<sup>285</sup> Jean Baker, *Votes for Women: The Struggle for Suffrage Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press), 79.

leaving her independence behind her. On the other hand it is possible she was glad of their companionship. Unlike Boston, where her sister Fanny lived most of the year drinking in the cosmopolitan environment, Cummington was not getting any bigger, or any more diverse. In fact, if anything, it was becoming more homogeneous in its relative isolation.

By 1880 Cummington's population had decreased by 200 from the previous decade, to 881, a downward slide that would persist for another fifty years. Mostly young people left Cummington to pursue economic and educational opportunity. The population, in contrast to growing cities, was fairly homogenous. Of the 881 residents in 1880, four were African-American, several families were from Canada and Ireland, while there was a man from Switzerland and another from Germany (unrelated to Adolph). The vast majority of residents, of white European descent, were from Cummington, nearby communities or from similar communities in New York, New Hampshire, or Vermont.<sup>286</sup>

In the press, some bemoaned that Cummington and similar hilltowns were in a state of decline, symbolized by abandoned farms with decaying buildings.<sup>287</sup> Yet, a closer look shows that Cummington, like many other aging New England towns, was thriving in its own quiet way. It was a small, homogenous, comfortable place to live, especially for people who did not strive for much cultural stimulation or entrepreneurial opportunity.

Most men worked either as farmers or farm laborers. The majority of farms were owner-operated while a few caretaker farmers took care of farms for wealthy people who lived out of town. Otherwise men worked at the paper mill (most mills had been abandoned by then) or in specialized jobs that supported the local community, such as doctor, minister, storekeeper, wood

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<sup>286</sup> Streeter and Morris, *Vital Records*, 308-318.

<sup>287</sup> Streeter and Berrien, *Only One Cummington, Volume II*, 398-403.



turner, or cobbler.<sup>288</sup> The most common employment for women was teaching, although some also worked at the paper mill.<sup>289</sup> Women also worked at other jobs, and in ways not recorded in the census, such as taking in boarders or working in a family-run shop.

After primary school, Henrietta's children attended the public high school that had replaced the private academy and select school. The church was the center of social life for residents young and old. Most people belonged to one of the two remaining Congregational churches. Residents joined Christian voluntary associations which sponsored community dances and suppers as well as moral lectures and regular prayer meetings. Christian temperance societies flourished.<sup>290</sup> Other societies included the Ladies Benevolent Society (established in the 1860s) and the Young Christian Endeavors Society (established in the late 1880s). For recreation there was a singing school as well as a baseball club that competed against other towns. Young people formed clubs and produced their own newspapers.

Although it was located far away from the leading centers of knowledge in the cities or in college towns such as Amherst, like other small farm towns Cummington embraced scientific and technological advances in agriculture. Henrietta and her family sometimes attended the town lyceum in which members debated such issues as woman suffrage and whether or not Bibles should be allowed in schools.

At the same time, Cummington was more conservative than the burgeoning cities of the Gilded Age. Unlike their entrepreneurial predecessors, most Cummington residents of the late nineteenth century probably rejected the notion of easy and fast money, advocating modest profits

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<sup>288</sup> Hal S. Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 66. Barron demonstrates this was typical of similar aging towns.

<sup>289</sup> Streeter and Morris, *Vital Records*, 308-318.

<sup>290</sup> Streeter and Berrien, *Only One Cummington, Volume II*, 339.

and economic independence.<sup>291</sup> In contrast to the consumption and materialism of cities and the chaos of wealth side by side with abject poverty, by and large residents of Cummington believed in the value of hard work that was morally good, brought success, and was “the basis of virtue.” Ideally, good men and women were modest and did not try to call attention to themselves while the community tried to achieve a consensus.<sup>292</sup>

While men had limited professional opportunities in a small town like Cummington, women’s work options were even more restricted. While in Boston an unprecedented number of single, middle class, educated women, worked in schools, libraries and offices, in Cummington the opportunities for women remained in many ways the same. In the city single women could forge an economically independent existence, whereas in the small country village women who chose not to marry generally lived with family members. Only a few households were headed by women, and these were mostly widows or single daughters who had inherited a home after their elderly parents died. If a woman did not marry, she was expected to be a “useful” spinster.<sup>293</sup> Single women teachers from other communities boarded with members of their students’ families. Women were often expected to resign from their teaching jobs upon marriage.<sup>294</sup> And, of course, relationships with men were under the scrutinizing eyes of the community.

Despite the lack of intellectual and work opportunities, Henrietta spent her first twelve years back in Cummington making the most of the opportunities available to her. She continued to teach intermittently into the 1880s and her evaluations improved. An 1872 school report

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<sup>291</sup> Barron, *Those Who Stayed*, 35.

<sup>292</sup> Paula Baker, *The Moral Framework of Public Life: Gender, Politics and the State in Rural New York, 1870–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 14, 20.

<sup>293</sup> Zsuzsa Berend, “‘The Best of None!’ Spinsterhood in Nineteenth-Century New England,” *The Journal of Social History* 33 (2000), 943.

<sup>294</sup> Carter, *Everybody’s Paid*, 20.

commended her teaching of geography and commented that “much oral instruction was given and probably in no other school was more knowledge gained outside of the regular textbooks.”<sup>295</sup>

However, Henrietta had higher ambitions than to be a teacher. Throughout her years in Cummington, Henrietta sought additional work opportunities. In 1872 she began to pursue another career as a librarian, a field that was becoming open to women.<sup>296</sup> Upon hearing that William Cullen Bryant was building the town a library, Henrietta bravely wrote to Bryant asking for the position of librarian at the new library. Bryant replied that regrettably he had already offered the job to Lorenzo Tower. However, he did offer her the job of cataloguing the 3618 books for the new Cummington library.<sup>297</sup>

The library project both gave Henrietta satisfying albeit temporary paid work and provided her invaluable contact with Bryant himself, one of the most famous men of her time. While the library was being built, the books were housed in the unfinished Upper Bryant Homestead (today the Sears farm). Henrietta would walk with Bryant from the Bryant Homestead to the upper farm where they sat in unfinished rooms, working and conversing. She eagerly listened to Bryant’s anecdotes of people he had met, which always imparted a humble lesson. When Henrietta lamented her inability to put together irreconcilable facts in history, Bryant quoted Horace Walpole, stating, “As for History, I know it’s a lie.”<sup>298</sup>

When Bryant was not in town they corresponded frequently by mail about the books. Bryant was involved in each step of the cataloguing process. Some of his comments to Henrietta

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<sup>295</sup> Annual Report of the School Committee of the Town of Cummington for 1872-3, Cummington, Mass.

<sup>296</sup> Woloch, *Women*, 291. Middle class ideals held women as innate “guardians of culture” and by extension natural librarians. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, libraries were frequented mostly by middle and upper class women (who had more time to read than men) and their children. Thus libraries were considered a safe place to work (the type of men to frequent libraries were thought to be harmless.) As with other fields, educated women held lower positions and earned less money than their male counterparts.

<sup>297</sup> Thomas G. Voss, ed., *The Letters of William Cullen Bryant Volume VI, 1872-1878* (New York: Fordham Books, 1993), 8.

<sup>298</sup> H. S. Nahmer, “William Cullen Bryant,” 28-41.

were amusing. Directing her to omit one book and send another to his Homestead Library, he remarked of a third, “Do what you please with the book of Lola Montez — notorious mistress of “‘Mad King’ Ludwig of Bavaria” — but do not include it in the catalogue nor in the collection- Burn it or keep it- I do not want it.”<sup>299</sup> Others were complimentary: “Dear Madam. Your catalogue came to hand on Saturday...It seems to be very well done.”<sup>300</sup>

Bryant was also an exacting employer. In one letter he faulted her on the way she wrote the letter “r”, complaining it looked too much like the “i” without the dot, although in general he complimented her on her neatness.<sup>301</sup> Apparently his caretaker (her uncle Francis) informed Bryant that the stress on working on the catalogue had made Henrietta ill and unable to complete the catalogue as quickly as she would have liked. He kindly reassured her, “I am very sorry to hear from Mr. F.H. Dawes that you have been ill in consequence of being laboriously occupied with making the catalogue. You should not hurry in your task. There is plenty of time before the building can possibly be ready to receive the volumes. I hope this letter will find you entirely recovered.” Yet four days later he writes, “I hope that you will have no further impediments to the speedy finishing of the catalogue — not that I am in a hurry for it but that you may not be further perplexed.”<sup>302</sup>

Bryant offered her the job of cutting the leaves of the books to stock the library at half the compensation of the catalogue work as “the catalogue required qualifications of a higher

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<sup>299</sup> William Cullen Bryant to Henrietta S. Nahmer, 1 October 1872. *Letters*, ed. Voss, 82.

<sup>300</sup> Bryant to Nahmer, 27 January 1873. *Letters*, ed. Voss, 101.

<sup>301</sup> Bryant to Nahmer, 19 October, 1872, *Letters*, ed. Voss, 84.

<sup>302</sup> Bryant to Nahmer, 15 October 1872, *Letters*, ed. Voss, 83.

order...<sup>303</sup> However, despite the higher order qualifications, the printed catalogue of 3,618 volumes printed in January, 1873 contained no acknowledgement of Henrietta's labor.<sup>304</sup>

Despite the apparent strain and pressure on Henrietta, the work on the catalogue afforded her several important benefits. First, it provided paid work and experience in a field more interesting to her than teaching. It established a connection with Bryant through which she later pursued job opportunities. Finally, and perhaps unexpectedly, Henrietta's connection with Bryant ensured her a corner of the Bryant legacy: she was in a unique position to write the hometown perspective on William Cullen Bryant. This in turn provided her access to his former friends and associates. The successful completion of a professional task combined with the time spent with Bryant may have made her feel more confident in her abilities, a confidence that helped her to become a leader in the local suffrage movement.

After completing the catalogue for the Bryant Library, Henrietta tried to secure more library work through Bryant. In 1874 she sought employment arranging his personal library. However, he replied that his assistant performed that work for him already. A year later she applied for work at another library [name unknown], and Bryant wrote her a letter of reference.<sup>305</sup> In 1878, Henrietta learned from Bryant that President Rutherford B. Hayes was designing a library for Ohio similar to the Bryant Library. Henrietta pursued a job cataloging this library. Bryant assured her he would recommend her to catalogue any library in English, or English and French.<sup>306</sup> Unfortunately there is no evidence that any of these leads came to fruition. It is not clear how Henrietta supported herself and her family. She may have taken in boarders — Bryant

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<sup>303</sup> Bryant to Nahmer, 26 March, 1873. *Letters*, ed. Voss, 115.

<sup>304</sup> "Catalogue of the Cummington Library," (New York: Evening Post Steam Presses, 1873).

<sup>305</sup> Bryant to Nahmer, 19 October 1872, *Letters*, ed. Voss, 85.

<sup>306</sup> Bryant to Nahmer, 6 April 1878, *Letters*, ed. Voss, 435. The proposed library eventually became the Hayes Memorial Library in Fremont, Ohio.

promised to recommend acquaintances of his to board at her house. It is also possible that Henrietta rarely worked for money after moving in with her parents.

At age forty, with high ideals and low fulfillment, her sister Fanny deeply involved in the suffrage movement in Boston, Henrietta was primed to become involved when the school suffrage law passed in 1879.

### Organizing for School Suffrage in Cummington

In February 1880 Henrietta was one of ten Cummington women who registered to vote in time for the March election. Women in cities were eligible to vote in the fall of 1879, while women in towns could first vote in the spring of 1880. Many of these pioneering voters were suffragists supportive of the cause.<sup>307</sup>

To be eligible to vote in 1879 a Massachusetts woman (like a man from Massachusetts) had to be a United States citizen, 21 years or older, could not be a pauper or guardian of the state, and had to have resided in Massachusetts for a year and in the town for six months. She also had to prove her ability to read.<sup>308</sup>

The voter registration process required several steps that Henrietta, unlike many women, had the time, money and patience for. This process was more cumbersome for women than men. First Henrietta had to apply in writing to the town assessor to declare her interest in being assessed for the poll. Then she had to go down to the town assessor, in this case in town hall, and present herself before a male assessor who or may or may not have been supportive, and declare *under oath* a list of all her taxable real and personal property. At that point she had to pay a poll tax. Initially it was \$2, a hefty amount that was much more than men had to pay. (In 1881 the poll

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<sup>307</sup> Harriet H. Robinson, *Massachusetts in the Women's Suffrage Movement: A General Political, Legal and Legislative History from 1774 to 1881* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883), 109.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 262-3.

tax for woman school suffrage was amended to be no more than 50 cents.) Then, on another day determined and advertised by the selectmen, she had to go register with the selectmen. Once registered, her name remained on the list as long as she continued to pay her tax. On the day of town meeting, she would go to town meeting and wait until her particular issue, in this case school committee elections, came up to cast her vote. By contrast, men were registered and assessed a poll tax as part of their tax assessment (it was not a separate step) and they never had to go in front of the assessor and declare their assets under oath in order to vote.<sup>309</sup>

These added steps women had to take to register were doubly difficult because of their unique circumstances. First, women had to publicly declare their intention to vote to the town assessor and registrar of voters who might be skeptical of women voting. In addition, women had to find transportation and time for at least two visits to town, cash for the registration fee, as well as childcare if they had young children. To vote, once again women had to take valuable time away from home (and many women could not go to town meeting if their husbands did) and risk public ridicule by attending town meeting on election day.<sup>310</sup>

Perhaps, because of the time and expense it took to vote, the first women to register in Cummington tended to be older. Of the first ten, only three were thirty or under. The majority were middle aged to elderly women in their forties, fifties and sixties. Most who were married had older children, not toddlers. Some of these early registrants, or their families, had been involved in abolition. The women who first registered heralded from all parts of Cummington — the East Village, The West Village, Cummington Hill, Swift River, and Lightening Bug. Some were from farm families, while others were from more affluent families in town.<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Lois Bannister Merk, “Boston’s Historic Public School Crisis,” *New England Quarterly* 31 (1958), 172-199.

<sup>310</sup> Robinson, *Massachusetts*, 109.

<sup>311</sup> Register of Voters in the Town of Cummington (1877-1883), Cummington, Mass.

According to Henrietta, only two registered Cummington women — herself and Deborah Shaw — voted in that first election. They cast the first votes of their lives on March 29, 1880. Accompanied by her father, Henrietta held her head high as onlookers mocked her.<sup>312</sup> She and Deborah were among the first 5000 women statewide who voted that day in Massachusetts. In Concord, Massachusetts, a hundred miles away, Louisa May Alcott along with nineteen other women cast their votes. If Cummington was like Concord, voting took place during the annual town meeting, a lengthy afternoon affair. When it was time for the school suffrage vote, the women stood up and deposited their ticket, or ballot, into a ballot box.<sup>313</sup>

Perhaps invigorated by the experience of voting, Henrietta and Deborah Shaw set about persuading more women to register to vote. They chose to create a local chapter of Abby May's Boston-based Massachusetts School Suffrage Association whose goal was to "make school suffrage effective" by getting women to vote."<sup>314</sup> To generate interest, Henrietta and Deborah Shaw went from house to house on horseback and by foot to entreat Cummington women to attend the first meeting of the school suffrage association.

However, on the night of the meeting, no else one showed up. Not even a sympathetic sister or relative in town where Henrietta had a considerable number of extended family. Even her own sister, Julia Rogers Kingman, who lived just down the road, or her mother, Sophronia Dawes, was not registered to vote. Recognizing the suffrage league was not viable in a small town like Cummington, Henrietta and Deborah decided they should individually convince women

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<sup>312</sup> Henrietta S. Nahmer, "Letter from George W. Curtis Concerning Women's Voting. An interesting reminiscence of a Woman Suffrage in Cummington in 1881." *Springfield Republican*. (u.d.) Suffrage files, Cummington Historical Commission Archive.

<sup>313</sup> Madeleine B. Stern, *L.M. Alcott: signature of reform* (Boston: University Press of New England, 2002), 16-18.

<sup>314</sup> Merk, *Massachusetts*, 174.



to vote- person by person.<sup>315</sup> That fall of 1880, five more women registered to vote, bringing the total to fifteen registered voters.<sup>316</sup>

In early 1881, Henrietta also worked on another suffrage tactic, again orchestrated by the state organization, the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association. In each town the suffragists such as Henrietta were asked to single out twelve legal male voters who were sympathetic to suffrage for women. These men were directed to request that the municipal suffrage article be inserted in the town meeting warrant. The men were then urged to be present at the town meeting to move the acceptance of the article. In this way, even though the final vote on the resolution would probably be negative, the suffragists would ensure a public discussion of the issue at town meeting with articulate prepared arguments being made for the suffrage cause.<sup>317</sup>

Henrietta and other suffrage supporters executed the strategy at town meeting in March 1881. A petition to the town was presented to extend the right to vote to women. The resolution was voted down 36 to 12.<sup>318</sup> This unsurprising defeat was not a bad loss. A quarter of the legal voters at the meeting supported suffrage publicly.<sup>319</sup> And Cummington men were forced to discuss woman suffrage. However, at that same town meeting, only three women of the fifteen registered women showed up to vote for school committee, Henrietta and two others.<sup>320</sup> Not

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<sup>315</sup> H.S. Nahmer, "Letter from George W. Curtis."

<sup>316</sup> Register of Voters in the Town of Cummington (1877-1883).

<sup>317</sup> Merk, *Massachusetts*, 104.

<sup>318</sup> *Hampshire Gazette*, 29 March 1881.

<sup>319</sup> Merk, *Massachusetts*, 104. The state suffrage association used this strategy for three years: 1881, 1882, 1883. In 1882, 26 towns in Massachusetts voted to request the legislature to pass the municipal suffrage bill, and about 75 other towns (including Cummington) had the article on warrant." However, the rising anti-suffrage movement identified and countered the strategy. They began to make sure that anti-suffragists were at town meetings to counter any pro-suffrage argument. Some antis argued that only undesirable women such as vagrants and transients would vote, while honorable women such as mothers with children would not have time to vote. After 1883, AWSA abandoned that particular strategy.

<sup>320</sup> H.S. Nahmer, "Letter from George W. Curtis."

even twelve sisters, wives, or daughters of the men who supported the suffrage resolution chose to exercise their right to vote.

Such a low turnout might have discouraged another woman. But Henrietta had a greater vision. Maybe she was influenced by reminiscences of the great slavery conventions held in Cummington. Perhaps she was moved by the legacy of William Cullen Bryant or her uncle Senator Dawes whose vision led them to inspired careers. Possibly through conversations with her sister, Fanny, Henrietta felt the support of the suffrage association behind her, and was inspired by Lucy Stone, a country girl like herself. She might have remembered that while she toiled with the support of one or two others, women like her all over the state were working together. Whatever the reason, Henrietta decided to organize a woman suffrage convention in Cummington, her goal: to rouse more interest and support for the cause and to get more women out to vote.<sup>321</sup>

During the 1870s Massachusetts women suffragists held conventions regularly. In addition to generating enthusiasm for a cause, conventions were used to set up petitioning and fundraising drives and to organize regional chapters.<sup>322</sup> Whereas women's conventions were groundbreaking in the 1840s and 1850s, by the 1880s they were more or less accepted events, reported on rather than mocked in the media.

While individual suffrage advocates traveled to remote towns, most conventions in Massachusetts were held in accessible places such as Boston or Worcester. While Cummington had been the site of multiple antislavery conventions twenty-five years previous, according to

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Merk, *Massachusetts*, 49.

Henrietta no suffrage convention had ever been held in such a small, obscure place as Cummington, perhaps at least in Massachusetts.<sup>323</sup>

### Planning the Convention

They had fewer than five months to organize the convention. Henrietta was familiar with organizing large events. Just the year before in 1879 she had helped organize Cummington's centennial. The first piece was identifying and securing star speakers who would attract other speakers and guarantee a large audience. Through her work with William Cullen Bryant, Henrietta had access to some of his illustrious intellectual friends and family who summered in the area. She first convinced her uncle Francis Dawes, a Justice of the Peace, and caretaker of the Bryant Homestead, and former selectmen and current librarian Lorenzo Tower to partake in the convention. Over the next few months, Henrietta traveled over one hundred miles on horseback trying to secure local luminaries to participate in the convention with the aid of her uncle. First she approached John Howard Bryant. The youngest and most politically radical of the Bryant brothers, and a poet and statesman in his own right in his adopted state of Illinois, John Bryant would bring dignity and a connection with the recently deceased William Cullen Bryant. John Bryant may have helped them to secure Parke Goodwin, William Cullen Bryant's son-in-law and business partner at the *Post*.

John Bryant then joined Henrietta and her uncle on the twelve-mile drive to Ashfield to invite George W. Curtis to speak at the convention. An important writer and editor of *Harper's* magazine, and, like Bryant, an influential political figure, Curtis lived in New York but summered in Ashfield. While Curtis turned them down, stating that he never interrupted his

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<sup>323</sup> Nahmer, Henrietta, "The First Vote Cast by Lucy Stone Was in a nearby Hill Town: Other personal instances connected with her early efforts in the cause of suffrage," *Springfield Republican*, 26 August 1918. Thus far no historian has documented small suffrage conventions held in remote areas of New England states.

vacation to give speeches, he did agree to send a letter for them to read at the convention.<sup>324</sup>

During the visit with Curtis, Henrietta mostly listened politely as the men talked about different topics including about a recent address given by Wendell Phillips.<sup>325</sup>

Soon after, the same trio called on Reverend John White Chadwick, of Brooklyn, New York, who summered in Chesterfield. The 41 year-old Reverend John White Chadwick was a famous liberal thinker, popular Unitarian minister. He was also a poet and religious writer who later wrote biographies of Theodore Parker and William Ellery Channing. Unlike Curtis, the affable minister readily agreed to speak in favor of women's suffrage, joining John Bryant, Parker Godwin, Stone and Blackwell.<sup>326</sup> Later, Henrietta with the aid of her uncle Senator Dawes secured a letter of support from the John Long, the Governor of Massachusetts.<sup>327</sup>

Fanny Rogers contacted Boston-based suffrage leaders Lucy Stone and her husband Henry Blackwell as well as facilitated Henrietta's correspondence with Julia Ward Howe. Julia Ward Howe's confirmation only came on August 12, and it was probably because of her that the convention was moved from the original August 9 to August 23.<sup>328</sup> Or, perhaps, it was because Lucy Stone was coming back later from her vacation on Martha's Vineyard and did not want to rush out to Cummington because she needed time to work on her newspaper, the *Woman's Journal*.

Henrietta arranged for the Women's Rights Convention to be held in the Village Church located on Main Street in Cummington. As the day approached, Henrietta arranged the itinerary

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<sup>324</sup> The letter, deemed too controversial, was never read at the convention.

<sup>325</sup> Henrietta S. Nahmer, "Suffragettes in Cummington in the Olden Days," *Hampshire Gazette*, 9 April 1910.

<sup>326</sup> H.S. Nahmer, "The First Vote Cast."

<sup>327</sup> Lois Bannister Merk, *Massachusetts*, 69.

<sup>328</sup> Julia Ward Howe to S. Nahmer Esq., 12 August 1881. Henrietta S. Nahmer Collection, Jones Library, Amherst.

for her famous guests. The summer days before the convention must have been furiously busy in the Rogers household. Henrietta, her sister Fanny who was home for the summer, her parents Sophronia and Joseph Rogers, and her children Clementina and Henry certainly all prepared the house and the property to look their best. The floors were washed and swept, linens washed, beds changed, food prepared and baked, cupboard well stocked, lawn kept, flowers picked, clothes gone over and selected.

### The Guests

On August 22, 1881, the day before the convention, Henrietta drove a carriage to meet the train in Williamsburg and pick up Henry Blackwell and Lucy Stone. Though she had not met them before, she quickly identified the couple. The 63 year-old Lucy was plainly dressed with her white hair in her trademark simple bun, while Henry was “loaded with documents.” However, she did not see Julia Ward Howe who also was supposed to arrive on that train. Blackwell and Stone did not know why. Perhaps something had interfered with her two-day journey from Newport and she was unable to come.<sup>329</sup>

On the ride up the mountain, Lucy Stone immediately put Henrietta at ease, for she was as able to talk as easily about farming as about suffrage. Having grown up on a farm in West Brookfield and now living on one in Dorchester, Lucy Stone commented on the drying dairy pans they passed as they travelled the rural rugged terrain of the nearly thirteen mile ride up the mountain to Cummington. They probably also talked about the last time Lucy Stone had come to the town over thirty years earlier as an antislavery lecturer in 1850, then just 32 and at the beginning of her career. The guests were taken up to Henrietta’s house for a supper.<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> H.S. Nahmer, “The First Vote Cast.”

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

Years later Henrietta's daughter Clementina Nahmer recollected that after everyone had retired that night Henrietta was roused by a knocking on the door sometime after 10:00 that night. Henrietta and her daughter arose to find Julia Ward Howe at the door. Having missed an earlier train from Boston to Northampton, she had taken a later train to Williamsburg. She had managed to hire a "plain carriage" for the two hour rough and hilly night ride. After welcoming their esteemed guest, Henrietta went to prepare a supper, leaving sixteen year-old Clementina to entertain Julia Ward Howe. Left alone with the famous personage, Clementina, shivering in her dressing gown, gamely tried to make conversation. She informed Mrs. Howe that Mr. and Mrs. Blackwell had arrived earlier. Clementina cringed as Mrs. Howe reacted sharply, "You must not say Mrs. Blackwell, she does not like it. You must say Mrs. Stone."<sup>331</sup> Howe was referring to the fact that though married, Lucy Stone had taken the unique step of keeping her own name upon marriage; she was the first in the country to do this.<sup>332</sup> Clementina might have briefly wondered why her own mother did not keep her own name, Rogers, especially as Adolph Nahmer had been gone for more than a decade.

### Visiting the Bryant Homestead with the Suffragists

The morning of the convention was beautiful and sunny with Cummington in its summer glory. The convention did not start until 2:00. After breakfast, Henrietta accompanied Lucy Stone, Henry Blackwell and Julia Ward Howe on a visit to the Bryant Homestead located a scant mile away. Henry Blackwell was particularly excited to meet Parke Godwin who was going to

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<sup>331</sup> C.D. Nahmer, "Reminiscences of Famous Ones: A gathering at Cummington, Mrs. Howe's visit to the place and the others who took part in the Bryant centennial, Upon Julia Ward Howe's death," n.d., n.p., Henrietta S. Nahmer Collection, Jones Library, Amherst.

<sup>332</sup> Robinson, *Massachusetts*, 35. This continued to give Lucy Stone trouble. In Boston, the registrars refused to let her vote for school committee unless she used her husband's name, which she refused to do. She continued to find that on legal documents and when registering with her husband at hotels, she had to sign as "Lucy Stone, married to Henry Blackwell," for her signature to be accepted as valid.

preside over the convention. While they were waiting to meet Parke Godwin, they talked of Henrietta's entreaties to George W. Curtis to attend the convention, and of Wendell Phillips continued support of the suffrage movement.<sup>333</sup>

The group was hosted by John Bryant, the youngest of the Bryant siblings. In William Cullen Bryant's library, he recited two of his brother's poems that were about the area, "The Rivulet," and "Thanatopsis."<sup>334</sup>

This must have been a very special moment for Henrietta and her sister Fanny. To be part of this private reading, with three of the most esteemed leaders of the woman suffrage movement, not to mention abolition movement, as well as members of prestigious families, would have been especially gratifying. As middle-aged single women who valued intellectual pursuit and social reform, in some ways they were outside the mainstream of Cummington life. Yet they themselves had not become famous intellectuals or reformers, perhaps out of lack of financial support, connections, personal commitment or personality. This brief gathering affirmed their life choices. After the Bryant visit and lunch, the group proceeded onto the convention.

## The Convention

Earlier that day friends and family had decorated the church with fresh flowers. The sweet smelling white Congregational church was simple and clean. Located on Main Street in Cummington, it was surrounded by well-kept homes, some the best in town, as well as small farms, stores and a mill. Behind the church flowed the North Branch of the Westfield River.

As 2:00 PM approached, men and women began to arrive by foot, carriage or horse from Cummington, Plainfield and other hilltowns. Members of the 400-strong audience included

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<sup>333</sup> H.S. Nahmer, "The First Vote Cast."

<sup>334</sup> C.D. Nahmer, "Reminiscences."

Cumington women who had not registered to vote such as Ellen and Esther Warner who, fairly well educated and well-off financially, represented the target audience.<sup>335</sup> Certainly Henrietta's relatives came as well as well-connected summer people eager to see the celebrated speakers.

At the afternoon session, Henrietta sat behind the podium alongside the other speakers of the day- Parke Godwin, Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe and Reverend Chadwick. The speakers combined two familiar lines of argument in support of suffrage. Godwin, Stone and Chadwick employed natural rights arguments that woman suffragists had been using since the beginning of the movement. Since men and women were inherently by nature endowed with equal capacities, they deserved equal rights. On the other hand, Julia Ward Howe drew on a more conservative argument that had become more prevalent in the late nineteenth century. In this view, men and women were by nature different. Men were stronger but more prone to vice, while women were weaker but more moral.<sup>336</sup>

Parke Godwin presided over the afternoon session. A cheerful speaker, he was unabashedly in favor of suffrage. He argued that in a true democracy there was no right to exclude women from voting as they did not fall into any of the principle areas of voter exclusion: immature youth, aliens, insane, or criminals. He further argued that neither sex can be fully developed until they had "equality of position." However, he also began with what so many knew: "Every cause must be carried on by those interested in it, and when the women take up the Suffrage cause the work will be successfully done."<sup>337</sup> Until many more women took up the suffrage cause, women would not get the vote.

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<sup>335</sup> Diary of Edward Francis Warner, 23 August 1881. Cumington Historical Commission Archive, Cumington, Mass. "Ellen and Esther have been to a woman's Suffrage Convention at the village this p.m. ...we went to the convention."

<sup>336</sup> Lucy Stone, "The Cumington Convention," *Woman's Journal*, August 12, 1881.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*



Next, John Howard Bryant read Julia Ward Howes' very famous poem, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," that she wrote in November 1861 during the Civil War. Then, Lucy Stone, wearing black, her white hair in a bun, spoke in her customary motherly manner. She reminded the crowd that she had spoken in Cummington thirty years earlier to support abolitionism. She also emphasized that since women, just like men, were governed by laws, they ought to be able to shape those laws. She encouraged the listeners to pressure representatives to support women's suffrage. And she chided women for not sacrificing their work to organize for something as critical to their lives and the nation's health as suffrage, noting that businessmen and farmers would leave their work to fight for suffrage, while women, she said bitinglly, "remain at home crocheting, making tatting, and working little dogs in perforated paper."<sup>338</sup>

Julia Ward Howe tried to explain the conundrum of why more women did not support woman suffrage. In contrast to Stone and Godwin's assertion that women were as sharp and smart as men, Howe focused on women's uniquely feminine character. She noted that women were "timid" and "easily startled" and "allow the prejudices of public opinion to frighten them." She encouraged women to stand firmly on the basis of the old element of "love and freedom" and the "new element " of the Christian Principle."<sup>339</sup>

Howe also spoke to the particular condition of living in a place with Cummington's topography: After admiring the scenery, she said, "Mountains are barriers. Let your mountains never shut out from your society the light of progress, the sweep and movement of new ideas. Let them, on the contrary, keep far from you the shallow conventionalities and the effete superstitions

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

which so heavily encumber our world without. Let them be to you the strongholds of freedom, of equal and impartial justice.”<sup>340</sup>

Next, Reverend Chadwick affirmed he had publicly supported woman suffrage for the past ten years from his pulpit in Brooklyn. For the skeptics in the audience, he said that there was no danger that woman would “unsex” herself by voting or by supporting the cause.<sup>341</sup>

Henrietta’s talk that afternoon is lost to history- no copy remains and it was not considered important enough to be published in the newspapers. How interesting it would be to see how she spoke to her local community members about suffrage, whether she spoke of equal rights or of women’s unique qualities, if she brought in her personal experience, or if she spoke generally. However, we can be sure that it was an important moment in her life, perhaps defining, standing and speaking in front of hundreds of men and women, including illustrious figures of her time whose opinion she valued so highly.

Parke Godwin announced the letters of support from Governor Long and George W. Curtis. However, Henrietta and the other speakers had decided not to read aloud Curtis’ letter. Curtis himself says as much in his opening lines.” I thank you for the kind invitation to speak at the meeting in Cummington, but even were I able to accept it I am not sure that what I might say would be agreeable to the meeting.” In his letter, Curtis argued that the problem with gaining suffrage in Massachusetts was not a lack of logical arguments but a lack of desire on the part of women in Massachusetts. “In Massachusetts what is needed to secure the ballot for women is not that a few women shall argue that logically they ought to have it, but that the multitude of women shall prove that they wish to have it. And they can prove this by voting at the school election.”

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<sup>340</sup> C.D. Nahmer, “Reminiscences.”

<sup>341</sup> Stone, “The Cummington Convention.”

Henrietta published the letter over thirty years later.<sup>342</sup> Curtis pointed out too clearly the conundrum woman suffrage advocates were facing and they probably did not want to highlight this problem to people they were hoping to rally behind their cause.

After Henrietta's speech, there was a break until the evening session. During that time, Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, Julia Ward Howe, Henrietta Nahmer, and Fanny Rogers and other conference attendees, walked down Main Street to the home of Jannett and Darius Lovell. At the time of the convention, Darius Lovell was serving in the Massachusetts legislature. In Cummington, he ran a general store on the first floor while Jannett had a millinery on the second.<sup>343</sup> At the house, the group ate and enjoyed listening to Julia Ward Howe play the piano and sing songs that she herself had composed.<sup>344</sup> Despite her willingness to host the prestigious group, records indicate Jannett Lovell was not persuaded to register to vote. However, her sister-in-law Laura Lovell who lived nearby registered in 1884.<sup>345</sup>

The convention continued in the evening presided by Henrietta's uncle F.H. Dawes. Unfortunately, nothing was recorded either of his remarks or that of Lorenzo Tower, both local leaders who had supported Henrietta's efforts. If their and Henrietta's speeches had been preserved, the arguments these local leaders used to persuade their own communities to embrace woman suffrage may have given us insight into the attitudes of Cummington residents towards woman suffrage. However, considering the locals insignificant, the local press as well as the *Woman's Journal* reported on the well-known rhetoric of the celebrity suffragists.

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<sup>342</sup> H.S. Nahmer, "Letter from George W. Curtis."

<sup>343</sup> Foster and Streeter, *Only One Cummington*, 393.

<sup>344</sup> C.D. Nahmer, "Reminiscences."

<sup>345</sup> Town of Cummington, General Register of Voters (1877-1883), Cummington, Mass.; Town of Cummington, General Register of Voters (1877-1927), Cummington, Mass.

Fanny Rogers then recited a Whittier poem. This was followed by a speech by Henry Blackwell. He argued that expanding suffrage, first to property owners, then poor whites, then blacks had benefitted the nation. So giving women the vote would benefit the country as well. He also noted that there had been about thirty-three per cent increase in the women's voting on the school suffrage over the previous year. There was singing in both sessions and it closed with a hymn.<sup>346</sup>

After the convention, Henrietta returned home with their guests. The next day, the three were taken to Williamsburg to the train to return to Boston for Stone and Blackwell and Newport for Julia Ward Howe.

### Impact of the Convention on Local Support for Suffrage

It is hard to evaluate the success of the convention. If success is determined by organization and attendance, then it appears to have been so. Over four hundred people attended the well-organized event. Lucy Stone lauded the convention in the suffrage publication *The Woman's Journal*, declaring, "The arrangements had been thoroughly made by Mrs. H.S. Nahmer and Miss Fanny Rogers, nieces of Senator Dawes; and the meeting was thoroughly advertised. The result was a full convention. A real interest was manifested, and if we mistake not, a seed was planted among the Hampshire Hills that will bring forth good fruit in the future."<sup>347</sup>

On a personal level for Henrietta, the event was a triumph. It was a public acknowledgement in not just a supportive but a spectacular setting in Cummington of her skills as an organizer and her beliefs as a suffragist. A far cry from the unattended meetings of six months

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<sup>346</sup> Stone, "The Cummington Convention." *The Woman's Journal*.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

before, for Henrietta the convention confirmed suffrage mattered and commanded the respect of some of the most respected people in the nation.

Yet it is difficult to judge how effective the convention was as far as furthering the cause of suffrage. It is unknown if the Cummington convention raised money. Cummington did not submit any suffrage petitions to the Massachusetts legislature that year. Neither were any local suffrage chapters organized though existing regional chapters may have gained a few new members. Furthermore, as a means of change, the convention did not cause a major shift in Cummington's suffrage activity. In the month following the convention, September 1881, the next opportunity to register, just five more women registered to vote. These included Henrietta's relatives: her mother, Sophronia Rogers, her aunt Melissa Dawes (Francis Dawes' wife) and cousin Mary Dawes. The other two registrants were 58 year-old Louisa Kingman and 38 year-old Mrs. L.R. Cobb of Main Street in Cummington.<sup>348</sup> The following March only seven women cast votes in the election for school committee members.<sup>349</sup> While that was more than double the previous year, it was still a discouragingly small number.

Still despite the lack of sustainable change, the Cummington suffrage convention may have had a less measurable but substantial effect on how people viewed the suffrage cause itself. At the convention, suffrage was presented as a respectable, not radical, cause. The convention took place in an established Congregational church. There were religious elements and literary culture integrated into the proceedings and the convention was presided over by men. The speakers dressed conservatively.

And for that one day in August, suffrage was not only respectable; it was popular. Doubtless the combined star power of the speakers: Stone, Blackwell, Howe, Godwin, Bryant attracted people to come to the convention who might otherwise have passed on a suffrage event.

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<sup>348</sup> Town of Cummington, General Register of Voters (1877-1927).

<sup>349</sup> Nahmer, "Letter from George W. Curtis."

In a small town of around 880, an event that drew over four hundred people in its downtown was worth considering. They certainly made an impact that day. The horses bearing riders and drawing carriages that streamed in needed to be watered, fed, and accommodated somewhere in the vicinity of the church. At the afternoon break, many of the people who attended from afar must have spilled onto Main Street in quest of refreshment or a place to picnic. And most importantly, all those people who attended the event, who were involved in the care of the visitors, or who merely viewed the spectacle from afar were, for at least one day, speaking or thinking in some way about suffrage.

### Continuing the Struggle for Suffrage in Cummington in the 1880s

While the story of the Cummington suffrage convention ends the evening of August 23, 1881, Henrietta's work with suffrage continued for over thirty more years. For the two years after the convention, Henrietta worked in coordination with the Boston headquarters. At the 1882 and 1883 town meetings, once again a suffrage proposal was on the town warrant, which again were not passed.<sup>350</sup> In 1884, modest change came to Cummington when two women, Mrs. Mrs. L.E. Bicknell and Mrs. P.P. Lyman were elected to be two of the three members of the Cummington School Committee.<sup>351</sup> Henrietta and her family continued to petition the Massachusetts state legislature. In May, 1885 Henrietta's mother headed a petition in support of municipal suffrage. Fanny also continued to submit petitions. However, no local league was established.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> *Hampshire Gazette*, 4 December 1883.

<sup>351</sup> Town of Cummington, Annual Report of the School Committee of the Town of Cummington for 1883-4, Cummington, Mass.

<sup>352</sup> Massachusetts General Court. House of Representatives *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, 9 January, 1883, 24,30; Massachusetts General Court, House of Representatives *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*; 22 January, 1884; Massachusetts General Court. Senate. *Journal of the Senate*, 6 March 1885, 219.

For the rest of the 1880s, Henrietta continued to live with her family. Her father died in 1883 at the age of 79. In 1887, she suffered another painful loss. Her son Henry died June 23 1887 at twenty-three of “paralysis of the heart,” a complication of pneumonia.<sup>353</sup> Fanny remained in Cummington teaching that year, perhaps to stay with her grieving sister, niece Clementina, and her mother. There is no record of any suffrage activity in Cummington for the late 1880s though that does not mean Henrietta did not engage in any.

### Pursuing Suffrage through the Cummington Chapter of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in the 1890s

Ten years after the convention, in 1892 Henrietta began employing a new tactic for bringing suffrage reform to Cummington. She helped establish Cummington’s chapter of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. At the first meeting on July 24, 1892 with eleven original members, Henrietta was immediately appointed WCTU “Superintendent of the Franchise.”<sup>354</sup> In contrast to suffrage and even abolition, temperance activism had been an acceptable though contested reform in Cummington since at least 1840. That year, despite the advice of the town’s Committee on Temperance, at the town meeting residents voted down a resolution 54-45 for Cummington to stop issuing liquor licenses and become a “dry” town.<sup>355</sup>

Temperance advocates saw alcohol as the root of many social ills. Inebriation caused a man to waste money, stop working, abuse his wife and children, and thus bring a family to ruin and poverty. So-called spirits also caused men to succumb to temptation such as prostitution, gambling, and even crime that they might otherwise withstand. From early on temperance

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<sup>353</sup> Robert Hall Babcock, *Diseases of the Lungs*, (New York: Appleton and Co., 1907), 281.

<sup>354</sup> Records of the Cummington Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), Cummington Historical Commission Archive, Cummington, Mass.

<sup>355</sup> Report of the Committee on Temperance, 1840. Temperance file. Cummington Historical Commission Archive.

advocates allied with the Protestant church. At communion, many ministers served grape juice instead of wine. Early tactics in temperance included using the power of prayer and persuasion to stop men from drinking.

After the Civil War, the temperance cause was taken up with new zeal by thousands of middle-class women as part of a general expansion of women's Christian-based clubs. These associations gave the growing number of middle class educated women a place to socialize with other women, while engaging in societal improvement activities.<sup>356</sup> The Women's Christian Temperance Union became the largest of these new associations.

Established in 1873, by 1890 the WCTU had 150,000 members nationwide and had spread internationally. Its initial focus was to protect the home by ridding society of alcohol. Under director Francis Willard, the WCTU's temperance mission broadened to include many related issues deemed pertinent to "home protection" from child labor to prison reform to international Peace to Bible studies in school and social purity. Each local chapter organized departments that were of interest to it. Originally relying on the power of persuasion, such as anti-saloon pray-ins and peer pressure, the WCTU soon supported more strategic activities from lobbying to picketing. In the 1880s the WCTU formally supported woman suffrage with the goal of achieving the temperance agenda.<sup>357</sup> Rather than focusing on woman suffrage as way to expand female power, the WCTU stressed the importance of woman suffrage to reforming and improving the home and society. For example, the ballot would allow women to vote for "dry" towns. This would theoretically prevent their husband from drinking, which would in reduce domestic violence, unemployment, prostitution and other social ills deemed to stem

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<sup>356</sup> Woloch, *Women*, 287.

<sup>357</sup> Alison Marie Parker, *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-censorship Activism, 1873-1933* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 5-6.



from alcohol. Reflecting the closeness of the two causes, state temperance leaders were often state suffrage leaders.<sup>358</sup>

Despite the fact that the WCTU actually helped expand the role of women into the public sector, it did so in the name of domesticity, emphasizing women's moral strength and purity, rather than organizing on the basis of female equality with men. Therefore, the WCTU was considered less radical and more acceptable to conservatives than suffrage organizations. In small towns such as Cummington, the WCTU was the "thinking women's organization and kept the suffrage movement alive when it may otherwise have died out."<sup>359</sup> That is probably why Henrietta helped start the WCTU.<sup>360</sup>

The Cummington WCTU's first work was to petition Cummington's annual Hillside Agricultural Society fair officers to prevent selling of alcohol at the fair.<sup>361</sup> Other early activities included an entertainment to fundraise, a proposal to make a dinner for town meeting, a lecture by Helen Rice, the state superintendent of WCTU for juvenile work, and organizing Demorest

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<sup>358</sup> Janet Zollinger Giele, *Two Paths to Women's Equality: Temperance, Suffrage, and the Origins of Modern Feminism* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Simon & Schuster, 1995), 68, 111.

<sup>359</sup> Giele, *Two Paths*, 88, 93.

<sup>360</sup> Records of the Cummington WCTU. In addition to Henrietta and her daughter Clementina, other early Cummington WCTU members included Henrietta's aunt, the veteran abolitionist Melissa Dawes and her daughter Mary; Mount Holyoke Seminary graduate Miss EP French; and women from other respected families including Mrs. E.F. Warner, Mrs. W.W. Orcutt, Mrs. Hattie Dawes Thayer, and Elizabeth Porter. The 35-40 members of the Cummington WCTU oversaw a variety of departments including scientific instruction, juvenile work, Sunday school, press, literature, evangelical work, Franchise, social purity, flower department, Demorest contest, loyal temperance legion.

<sup>361</sup> Cummington WCTU, 30 Aug 1892.

contests in the schools.<sup>362</sup> The group also organized lectures, e.g. Ruth Baker, corresponding secretary of the Massachusetts WCTU, came to talk in April, 1894.<sup>363</sup>

Henrietta's principal interest in the WCTU was probably suffrage though she most likely enjoyed the socializing it brought as well. In July 1893 she reported that seven women had promised to register to vote.<sup>364</sup> In 1895 when Massachusetts allowed women to vote in a referendum on municipal suffrage, the Cummington WCTU organized seventy women to vote in favor of a referendum. While the town of Cummington gave majority vote to the referendum, it was defeated statewide.<sup>365</sup>

In October 1893 Henrietta introduced a WCTU resolution to honor Lucy Stone who had recently died. "We as the only organized body of women in our midst therefore resolve that we strive to emulate His bright example, that we will cherish the same undaunted spirit in the face of reproach, that we will work along the lines which she so unselfishly planned and tread those paths which by His toil and sacrifice she has made easier for our sometimes weary and faithless steps."<sup>366</sup> A copy of this resolution was sent to Henry and Alice Stone Blackwell, who later sent a note of appreciation back. As a representative of the WCTU, Henrietta interacted with the wider world. Serving as Cummington representative to WCTU meetings, she attended meetings in Springfield in 1893 and Northampton in 1894.

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<sup>362</sup> Sharon Ann Cook, "Through Sunshine and Shadow": *The Women's Christian Temperance Union, Evangelicalism and Reform in Ontario, 1874-1930*. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1994), 136. Demorest contests were national WCTU contests in which a medal was given for the best speech on the topic of prohibition, total abstinence, social purity, anti-narcotics, scientific temperance or woman suffrage

<sup>363</sup> Cummington WCTU, 2 April 1894. Mrs. Baker is mentioned in Julia Ward Howe et. al, *Representative Women of New England* (Boston: New England Historical Publishing Company, 1904), 392.

<sup>364</sup> Cummington WCTU, 1 July 1893.

<sup>365</sup> H. S. Nahmer, "Letter from George W. Curtis."

<sup>366</sup> Cummington WCTU, October 1893.

However, while the WCTU gave Henrietta a vehicle through which she could organize for suffrage, she did not accomplish as much as she would have liked. In 1896, the WCTU declined her proposal to organize a separate suffrage league. At the same meeting the organization tabled her proposal to purchase a book by an American woman WCTU reformer Jessie Ackerman, *The World Through a Woman's Eyes*, a travel story of Ackerman's trip to Hawaii, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, China, Thailand, Java, Burma, India and South Africa, and a story in which she looked with particular "interest" at the "position of women" in these countries.<sup>367</sup> By the mid-1890s, the number of Cummington WCTU members had dwindled, unlike other Cummington Christian associations, e.g. the Christian Endeavors, which flourished into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Henrietta as Writer and Journalist in the 1890s

During the 1890s, Henrietta continued to reap benefits from her connection with William Cullen Bryant. The focus on Bryant allowed her publication in prestigious magazines. In March, 1892, her article entitled "Bryant's New England Home," appeared in the *New England Magazine*, which published reputable writers. In November 1893 she was elected a trustee of the Bryant Free library, and in 1894 Henrietta was one of five Cummington residents appointed by the town to organize a literary festival in celebration of Bryant's Centennial birthday.<sup>368</sup> Held on Bryant's property and attended reportedly by five thousand people, the event drew luminaries from near and far. As at the suffrage convention just over a decade before, Parke Godwin presided, Reverend Chadwick spoke as did Julia Ward Howe and John Howard Bryant. Henrietta

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<sup>367</sup> Patricia Grimshaw, "Settlers Anxieties, Indigenous Peoples, and Women's Suffrage in the Colonies of Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii, 1888-1902," *The Pacific Historical Review*, 69 (2000), 553-572.

<sup>368</sup> Lottie M. Tower to H.S. Nahmer, October 28, 1920. Henrietta S. Nahmer Collection, Jones Library, Amherst.

performed a duet of Bryant Hymn “O Deem not they are blest alone” with Julia A. Shaw while Fanny organized the children’s oration.<sup>369</sup>

In 1895, Henrietta received a coveted yet hasty invitation from Charles Norton to one of his famous academy dinners in Ashfield.<sup>370</sup> Later in 1896 she published “Bryant as I knew Him;” “William Cullen Bryant: Our Poet of Nature as I remember Him” in a literary journal entitled *The Arena*. Her essay was part of a section called *Personal Recollections of America’s 7 Great Poets The Arena, a literary review*. Other authors in the volume included Edward Everett Hale on Oliver Wendell Holmes, B.F. Sanborn on Emerson, and Reverend Chadwick, also on Emerson.<sup>371</sup>

### Leaving Cummington Again

After her mother’s death in 1895, Henrietta, now fifty-five, decided to quit Cummington. Her daughter Clementina, now thirty, unmarried and also a writer, was probably ready to move to a place where there were more opportunities for employment and suffrage activism. By 1900, Henrietta and her daughter had moved to Springfield.<sup>372</sup> It is not known if they moved because Henrietta desired it, or her daughter Clementina or both.

By leaving, Henrietta was separating from a community she had been a part of for most of her life. While she had no immediate family in Cummington, she left behind relatives and a close community. In addition, she was parting with her longtime home and her beloved rural landscape. On the other hand, the cosmopolitan city of Springfield offered opportunities Henrietta

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<sup>369</sup> Bryant Memorial, Cummington 1794-1894, (Springfield, Mass.: Clark W. Bryan Co. Printers, 1894).

<sup>370</sup> Letter from Charles Norton to Henrietta S. Nahmer, 20 August 1895, Henrietta S. Nahmer Collection, Jones Library, Amherst. “Dear Mrs. Nahmer, Your note of the 17<sup>th</sup> has just reached me. I am sorry for the delay, for I fear that it may cause you to miss the annual dinner which is to be served the day after tomorrow. Ex-governor Russell is to be the chief guest. With kind regards to your daughter and yourself, I am- Very truly yours, C.E. Norton.”

<sup>371</sup> H.S. Nahmer, “William Cullen Bryant.”

<sup>372</sup> Bureau of the Census, 1900 census, Springfield, Ward 4, Hampden, Massachusetts.

had not experienced since she had lived in Rochester. There she might find more like-minded people. In addition she would no longer have to mind her large farmhouse and do the chores of country life. Springfield seemed a logical choice. She had connections to Frank Sanborn the editor of the *Springfield Republican* who had also been head of the Hampshire County suffrage league. It was large enough to offer urban attractions but not as overwhelming as Boston might have been. She could fairly easily visit Cummington as well as Boston.

In Springfield, Henrietta joined the Equal Suffrage League. For one meeting she wrote a paper about Susan B. Anthony. In 1906, she and Clementina attended a National Suffrage Association meeting in Baltimore.<sup>373</sup> Henrietta continued to pursue her career as a writer. Both Henrietta and her daughter Clementina wrote frequently for the *Springfield Republican*, mostly about the local history of Cummington. Through these articles, their voices shaped Cummington history for years to come, and many of which inform this piece.

By 1920, Henrietta had moved to Amherst where she lived with her sister Fanny and her daughter Clementina in a rented house. Henrietta Rogers died in 1924 in Amherst, Massachusetts at the age of eighty-three.

### **Legacy**

What did Henrietta and her suffrage work mean for Cummington and the movement? The story of Henrietta and her work towards suffrage clearly shows that in Cummington the movement for suffrage was much smaller than the movement for abolition. Without Henrietta and without support from her well-connected sister Fanny, there probably would not have been suffrage activity in Cummington. By contrast, the abolition movement involved so many different people that its momentum did not rest on the shoulders of a single individual. Yet the suffrage

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<sup>373</sup> H.S. Nahmer, "A tribute to Susan B. Anthony."

movement was not completely unrelated to the abolition movement. In Cummington, Henrietta's effort for woman suffrage was clearly supported by her immediate family: her sister Fanny who provided tactical support and connections from Boston, her father who escorted her to the polls in the face of ridicule, and her mother who led a petition drive for the unpopular cause. But her effort was also supported by veterans from the abolition movement: her parents, her uncle and aunt, Frances and Melissa Dawes, and perhaps others who expressed support for woman suffrage in the town meetings in the early 1880s. Their past support for a radical cause may have made them more open to the suffrage movement than were the young, educated men and women of Cummington who fervently embraced their Christian activities but not a woman's right to vote. Only future research on suffrage activities in other small towns similar to Cummington will reveal if Cummington was unique or typical in this regard.

In light of the lack of demonstrable public support for suffrage in Cummington, it might seem that the personal and public effort that Henrietta put into suffrage was, to put it bluntly, a waste of time. According to her daughter in a letter donating Henrietta's papers to Amherst's town library, Cummington never honored the work she did in Cummington: "it is because ... the town of Cummington ignored my mother that I want her name stressed in any record you may make of this collection."<sup>374</sup>

And yet, if it were not for the Henrietta's of the world, the ones who are willing to carry the torch when no one else will, many advancements, particularly in the area of human rights,

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<sup>374</sup> Clementina D. Nahmer to Charles R. Green, 16 June 1939, Henrietta S. Nahmer Collection, Jones Library. "At the sesquicentennial of the town neither my mother or I were invited or noticed and my mother had the most brilliant intellect of any woman who ever was born or lived in that place. Later after my mother's death her youngest sister got up a yearly Bryant day and at these days and at other places she calmly took the credit of everything my mother had done... it is because of these misstatements and because the town of Cummington ignored my mother that I want her name stressed in any record you may make of this collection. Some of the things I have sent you should by rights go to the Cummington but no one there would appreciate them. Amherst has two colleges, many students and professors who may some of them find these things of value sometime. In Cummington no one would use them. Hence I have sent them to you knowing they would be of use and taken care of."

would never have been made. Henrietta and the hundreds like her across Massachusetts, helped to keep the idea of a woman's right to vote on the table for the next generation to struggle with and from them to the next, until the majority of Americans finally caught up and ratified the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1920.

For Cummington today, the story of Henrietta and the suffrage movement draws us into the landscape and culture of Cummington of 130 years ago, a time of horse-drawn carriages, long skirts, and surviving hard winters without the aid and comfort of electricity or gas. Yet it also reminds us that back then, just like today, people were wrestling with critical ideas about society that affected their everyday life. Now, just as before, people like Henrietta, though not always the most popular in town, are the ones who move the dreams along.

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