

# ORGANIZATION, PURPOSES AND ACTIVITIES OF COUNTY AND LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

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This article is intended to provide helpful suggestions for the organization of local historical societies and for the stimulation and promotion of the local societies already organized.

The article is not exhaustive. It is meant to be helpfully advisory. The general information should be adapted to meet local needs. From time to time additional material can be included in future articles. Suggestions for such additions will be welcomed by the State Historical Society.

## *Importance of Local Historical Societies*

The importance of local historical societies lies in the fact that they serve as local centers of historical interest and their activities are a step in the direction of covering the whole field of local history more adequately.

From 1821, when the first county historical society in the United States was organized at Salem, Massachusetts, under the name of the Essex Historical Society (now known as Essex Institute),<sup>2</sup> the formation of local historical societies in the United States has con-

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<sup>1</sup> See *Bulletin of Information*: No. 16 (Published at Iowa City, Iowa, in 1941 by the State Historical Society of Iowa).

<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings of the Essex Institute*, Vol. I, pp. 3-4.

tinued; but the periods of greatest activity have been associated with centennial anniversaries and patriotic events.

#### *Form of Organization*

The form of organization of a local historical society may be provided for by a constitution and by-laws or by articles of incorporation.

The business affairs of a local historical society are usually conducted by a board of directors or executive committee. Annual meetings are the general practice, though some local societies meet more frequently. At these annual meetings officers are nominated and elected, there are committee reports and other routine business, with minutes kept regularly and filed as a valuable index to material relating to the history of the locality. Following the business meeting a program of addresses or other features of interest to the general public is presented.

#### *Membership*

The provisions for membership are uniformly democratic. In general any person residing within the county or other area covered by the organization may obtain membership by application and the payment of the membership dues. Often there is provision for life membership after a certain number of years of active membership or upon the gift of a specified sum of money for the purposes of the society.

#### *Purposes*

The stated purposes of the local historical society are to collect, preserve, and disseminate the materials of local history. Letters and diaries relating to the life of the pioneers, early settlers, and distinguished citizens; old family Bibles containing genealogical material; account books containing data on prices and commodities; and other private papers or photographs in the possession of persons who may or may not recognize their historical value are secured through voluntary gift for permanent preservation. The important public archives of counties, towns, and villages are safeguarded from unwarranted destruction. Church records are preserved. Newspaper files and other local publications are kept for future reference. Provision is made for correct marking of historic sites by State agencies. In addition to these specific purposes, there is the general aim to promote and preserve a vital interest in State and local history.

#### *Activities*

The activities of local historical societies will vary with the initiative and resourcefulness of the leadership and the interest of the members. Undoubtedly interest can be stimulated by a greater variety in programs.

In addition to talks and formal addresses on the history of the county, an occasional pageant or historical play might attract more public interest. Forums on local history, panel discussions, quiz programs, and costume parties in connection with important State

or local anniversaries could be effective. Special programs provided by schools or churches could be encouraged and utilized at meetings of the local historical society.

Programs can be held in various sections of the county from year to year with features relating especially to that area. An occasional tour of the county with short historical talks about the places visited could be substituted for a meeting of the society. In some instances these tours could be extended into neighboring counties with a common historical background. Such tours could form a part of the observance of a county anniversary, such as the anniversary of its organization.

Where radio facilities are available and time can be arranged at regular intervals, such as once a month, interviews on pioneer life in the county or important events of local significance would attract many listeners. An occasional skit or dramatic presentation could be used to vary the program. There should be careful preparation of the material under the direction of an experienced person. At the outset it would be well to limit the period to fifteen minutes. Excellent programs of this type might find a commercial sponsor.

The activities of a local historical society should enlist the cooperation of the schools of the county. Teachers should be encouraged to give their pupils such projects as the collection of material and the writing of historical essays or stories about their county, their school, their church, or the community in which they live.

Finally, the local historical societies will find it advantageous to cooperate with the State Historical Society. Members of the staff may appear on programs, and requests for helpful suggestions will receive careful attention. The harmonious cooperation of all groups interested in a common purpose will result in unexpected accomplishments.

### *Property*

The property of the local historical society consists of such materials as manuscripts, books, maps, museum items, portraits, paintings, and public archives.

The acquisitions of the local society can be cared for and displayed more adequately if funds are available for the services of a curator. Occasionally it will be possible to secure volunteer services of a trained person on a part-time basis.

A card catalogue of acquisitions should be maintained, indicating the name of the donor, the date of acquisition, and items of interest concerning the gift. The catalogue should be classified with guide cards indicating sections devoted to books, manuscripts, photographs, etc.

The proper care and recording of acquisitions is a matter of vital concern, since materials donated to a local or State historical society represent a "public trust." Much of the significance of a museum piece is lost if the data concerning its former use and ownership is unknown or forgotten.

*Housing of the Society*

Some few local historical societies have been fortunate enough to receive donations of a suitable building with an endowment fund for maintenance. More often quarters must be sought in a public building, such as the county courthouse, the public library, or the community building. Where space is available in a public library, the librarian serves as curator and has the necessary training for the proper cataloguing and care of the material.

One of the real problems of the local society is to find suitable housing under friendly auspices in a location which is easily accessible to the citizens of the community. In such quarters provisions can be made for interesting displays of historical material. Displays can be changed from time to time to stimulate and promote interest in the work of the society. Modern technical skill in lighting and arrangement can add materially to the effectiveness of these displays.

*The Relation of the Public Library to the Local Historical Society*

Whether the local historical society is housed in the public library building or elsewhere, it should find cooperative assistance in the library in any search for material on State and local history. Since the publications of the State Historical Society are free to these libraries, it should be possible for them to supplement this collection with books and pamphlets bearing on the history of the local community and the State.

The public library can also perform a valuable service in the field of local history by collecting and preserving materials relating specifically to the life and history of the community. It may include (1) files of local newspapers and periodicals; (2) official publications (city ordinances, school laws, and reports of county officers); (3) city directories; (4) announcements, programs, and proceedings of local organizations (literary, scientific, political, educational, fraternal, and religious); (5) books and articles by local men and women; (6) photographs of prominent citizens and local scenes; and (7) clippings relating to the life of the community. All these collections furnish valuable source materials which will amplify and supplement the work of the local historical society.

*Relation of Local Historical Societies to State Historical Society*

The State Historical Society furnishes speakers for meetings of the local historical society when such engagements can be arranged to fit into the regular work of staff members.

In turn, the local historical societies can make a real contribution to the State Historical Society in suggesting research projects, submitting suitable articles for publication, and promoting the general welfare of the State Historical Society in their respective communities. In fact, such local support of the endeavors of the State

Historical Society is one of the essentials in promoting the cause of State and local history in the State.

*Publication of the Materials of Local History*

Among the most active members of the local historical society are those who combine literary ability with historical interest. Such ability and interest should be sought and developed. Single articles or a series of stories on local history can be prepared for the local newspaper. Occasionally such writing will find avenues of publication in newspapers or magazines with wider circulation. Some of the material will be suitable for publication in historical magazines. The State Historical Society is always interested in an opportunity to examine such contributions, and many such stories have been accepted for publication. Whether published or not, all such historical material can be preserved in the files of the local historical society, the public library, or by the State Historical Society.

Printed or mimeographed leaflets can provide authentic information for the people of the community and the passing traveler. In the larger centers they can be made available through chambers of commerce and public libraries.

*Suggestions to Local Historians*

The local historian will find it advantageous to prepare himself by the study of methods and techniques used by some of the masters of historical writing. Perhaps it would be well to begin with such a basic source as Channing, Hart & Turner's *Guide to the Study of American History* (Ginn & Company, 1912). This book is out of print but will doubtless be found in many of the public libraries. Helpful guides to method will be found in Allen Johnson's *The Historian and Historical Evidence* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926) and in Homer C. Hockett's *Introduction to Research in American History* (Macmillan Co., 1931).

It is of primary importance that the historical writer should understand clearly the distinction between original and secondary sources of information. Original sources include all material preserved from the period under study—written or printed documents, survivals such as mounds and buildings, and relics in general. Secondary sources are historical writings based on original sources. The careful historian will consult original sources whenever they are available.