
MAINE'S OLDEST HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

PREFACE

I am honored to be asked to contribute a preface to this special issue which treats the early history of Maine's four oldest historical organizations: Maine Historical Society; Bangor Historical Society; York Institute; and Pejepscot Historical Society. As the Director of the nation's — and New World's — first historical society, I take pardonable pride in the fact that three of these four institutions were inspired by, and patterned after, the Massachusetts Historical Society. Not that this was an unusual development. Every American historical society founded in the early nineteenth century modeled itself after the Boston organization, which itself was a derivative. Its inspiration was the Society of Antiquaries of London, the oldest historical organization in the world. Because of its pronounced natural history and scientific orientation, York Institute turned to other models, such as the Essex Institute of Salem and the Boston Natural History Society.

By a curious coincidence, the first historical society with which I became associated in a professional capacity, the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio (Cincinnati), was founded in the same year the Maine Historical Society was organized (1822). I served as its Director from 1960 to 1966. The founders of this pretentiously titled society (one of my first objectives was to change its name to The Cincinnati Historical Society) were transplanted proper Bostonians who had been affiliated with the Massachusetts Historical Society. Theirs was a conscious effort to reproduce the Boston society on the Ohio frontier, and they were remarkably successful in this endeavor.

The most striking feature of all of these early historical societies, from Maine to Ohio to Georgia, was their sameness. They seemed to have emerged from one common mold. They were all private organizations. Their membership was restricted in numbers (as well as race and sex) and consisted of what was commonly called in the nineteenth century “the better sort” — the learned, and social and economic elite. These were men who shared common values, had a profound historical consciousness and, above all, an abiding love of country.

Sameness also characterized the programs of these societies. They collected and preserved a wide range of historical materials, from manuscripts to rare books, to artifacts, and communicated information through publications, mostly documentary in nature. Make no mistake about it, these were gentlemen “culture clubs” with limited constituencies, limited programs, and limited outreach. In combination, they constituted an exclusive group of learned societies. The general public had no direct involvement in their programs.

The historical societies of our era, whether public or private, or state or local in geographic orientation, bear little resemblance to their antecedents. Some remarkable changes have taken place, especially since the end of World War II and the advent of the “popular history” surge. The gentlemen “culture clubs” of yore are gone. Even my own Massachusetts Historical Society, which is usually characterized as staid, conservative, and, yes, elitist, would be unrecognizable to our Founding Fathers. For example, these men would not only be surprised (if not mortified) by our women members, but also by women serving on our governing board.

Yes, the times they are a-changin’ Today’s historical societies have become “public” cultural and educational institutions, even if they have a private legal base. They serve every element of the community, from school children to senior citizens.

One of the most heartening developments relating to the recent growth of historical societies is the addition of many professionals to their ranks. When I entered the historical

society field in 1960, there were only a handful of professional historians associated with these institutions. Today, there are thousands working in this area, in addition to thousands of well-trained specialists in a variety of fields, from manuscript processors to museum curators to oral historians. The explosion of historical societies in recent times really represents one of the most significant cultural developments of modern American history. The full impact of this movement has not as yet been recognized or documented. The developments in Massachusetts and Maine are a microcosm of what has been happening all over the nation. Historical societies featuring vibrant programs have become a common sight on the American cultural landscape.

As the authors of the enclosed essays have noted, Maine's oldest historical organizations, including the York Institute, have been heavily influenced by the new currents of thought. They have begun to move with the tide of change. Beginning as restricted organizations, they have become open societies and their programs are designed for a broad audience. The age of elitism is also over in Maine.

And what of the future? Will the metamorphosis continue? Will America's historical societies emulate public libraries and sponsor a myriad of programs for a variety of audiences? Will they become "cultural shopping centers"? (A few already are.)

It will be interesting to see what does happen, especially here in the East where the tradition of the private society was first developed. As for the four Maine institutions discussed herein, my prediction is: As goes the nation, so will go Maine.

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