

Can the Scholars' History be the Public's History?

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WHEN Isaiah Thomas was selecting the incorporators of the American Antiquarian Society in 1812, he made a point of bringing in men with political clout in both the Federalist and Republican parties. It was, after all, 1812. Thanks to the Embargo, and then the war, partisan political passions in Massachusetts were as heated as they were ever to get during the early years of the republic. It made sense for a new learned society seeking incorporation from the state legislature to present itself as above the political fray, a model of nonpartisan, or at least bipartisan, collaboration. The ten Worcester incorporators shared some other characteristics. Most were lawyers, the only exceptions being a physician, a minister, and Thomas himself, a retired printer, publisher, and bookseller. All were associated with the Second Parish, now called the First Unitarian Church, that had separated from the original Worcester parish in the 1780s. The members of the Second Parish tended to regard themselves as a social and intellectual aristocracy, and their founding pastor, Aaron Bancroft, was among Thomas's incorporators.

The group Thomas chose also had remarkably close connections to the Chandler and Paine families, who had occupied the

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summit of Worcester County's pre-Revolutionary aristocracy. The Rev. Aaron Bancroft was married to a daughter of John Chandler, third of that name to preside over the Worcester courts. A Loyalist during the Revolutionary upheaval, Chandler had died in exile in London in 1800. Chandler's nephews, Nathaniel Paine and William Paine, were among the incorporators. William had served as a physician in the British army during the War for American Independence. He had only recently resigned his British commission—and given up his pension—upon being called back to active duty in His Majesty's service in order to fight the Americans in the War of 1812. Levi Lincoln, who had served in Thomas Jefferson's cabinet, was among the Worcester incorporators of the society, as was his son, Levi Jr., who was married to a granddaughter of John Chandler. It would be difficult to fault Thomas's sense of which members of the Worcester community would be most qualified to assist him in launching the new society on its perpetual mission. The incorporators brought wealth, education, political power, and social prominence to the service of the society. They and many of their descendants played active roles in its work and some are playing active roles today.

In 1875 a different group of Worcester men gathered to organize themselves for the study of the past. They called their new institution the Worcester Society of Antiquity. Its founders had a strong interest in archaeology, but the society gradually took local history as its domain, and it evolved first into the Worcester Historical Society and now the Worcester Historical Museum.

One of the most striking things about the origins of the Society of Antiquity is the social profile of its founders and early members. They came largely from the ranks of Worcester's low white-collar and skilled blue-collar workers. Their social standing was very much on the minds of the society's founders. The only other organization in Worcester devoted to the study of the past was the American Antiquarian Society, and the new investigators knew they were not of the economic and social class that might aspire to election to that eminent institution. Samuel Staples, who called

the first meeting of the new society, later acknowledged that the American Antiquarian Society was 'supported and maintained by gentlemen of eminence in their several walks and professions, embracing in its membership persons of the rarest culture and profound knowledge. Such an institution is useful beyond calculation, . . . but it fails to meet the wants of many persons interested in like researches and purposes, who are not so fortunate as to be reckoned among the members of so honorable a body.'¹ What separated the American Antiquarian Society from the Worcester Society of Antiquity was class—and all the privileges associated with class during the nineteenth century, including the opportunity to pursue an advanced education, the leisure to engage in historical investigation, and the company of men and women of comparable culture and privilege.

In Worcester and in the nation, soon after the incorporation of the Worcester Society of Antiquity, a new breed of investigator entered the arena of historical study. This was the professional scholar, based at a university rather than in a law office or boardroom, with formal graduate training on the German model. When the history of the American Antiquarian Society is written, it will be interesting to see how the gentleman-scholars of the old type responded to the pretensions—and the demonstrated competence—of the new breed of credentialed historians. Whatever the negotiations that must have gone on, and still go on, between the professional scholars and the nonacademic leaders of the Society, together they have managed to pursue an agenda that successfully joined the development of an already great library with the cultivation of the most advanced scholarship in the field of early American studies. If Samuel Staples had been around to observe it, he might have sensed that there were now two elites in the American Antiquarian Society, neither of which he was qualified to enter. In their collaboration, the two elites participated in what gradually became a more and more pronounced drift away from the intellectual world of self-educated lay persons

1. *Collections of the Worcester Society of Antiquity* 1 (1881): 15–16.

like Isaiah Thomas or Samuel Staples. The ladies and gentlemen from the nonacademic world who have steadfastly supported the Society in recent decades must have made many an act of faith as they learned of the sometimes rarefied studies made possible by their dedication to the collection and preservation of the resources with which the American past might be explored.

This drift has not been confined to the American Antiquarian Society, of course. In the last few decades scholars have wandered off in such unprecedented and unexpected directions that non-specialists often have wondered what had become of the American story as they had been exposed to it in the course of their own formal educations. One way to picture what's been going on in American history is to imagine the American past as a large ball of string, the sort of thing created by someone who for some reason believes in saving string piece by piece. The ball holds together, but on its surface there are always any number of loose ends. For the last few decades we have seen one scholar after another come along and pull on a string that attracted his or her curiosity. Sometimes, as people tugged, a long piece was separated from the ball, and those who studied it discovered things that changed our way of thinking about the whole. Sometimes it turned out to be a piece that left our overall understanding largely unaffected. But there have been many pickers and pluckers and pullers and tuggers, and many pieces laid out. Each strand pulled from the ball brought new loose ends to the surface, and it seemed someone was just bound to notice each of those and give it a tug, too. Before too long we began to hear cries of alarm from various sources, warning us that our sense of the whole was becoming, well, unraveled.

These warnings were justified to the extent that scholars studying their own pieces failed to think carefully about how they ultimately made sense as part of the whole. In recent years an increasing number of scholars have undertaken the task of bringing the pieces back together, without, they hoped, losing the considerable benefits gained from someone's having peeled them off in

the first place. An urge to narrate, to synthesize, to reassemble the whole, has often been associated with a sense of public duty. What works for academic professionals in their journals and at their conferences is not necessarily what works for a public that wants—we should hope—to understand its history.

From several directions historians have heard nagging reminders that their discipline has a distinct public responsibility. They are, these voices tell them, the keepers of the American past. If their work has any social value, it must be among their responsibilities to convey to the public whatever light their investigations may shed on where Americans have been and where they are in their collective journey.

Some aspects of this gap between history as scholars pursue it and history as it is understood by the American people have come into the news recently, particularly as a result of the controversy over the adoption of national standards in American history.

As you may recall, the National History Standards Project was funded in the spring of 1992 by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the United States Department of Education. Its goal was 'to develop broad national consensus for what constitutes excellence in the teaching and learning of history in the nation's schools.'² When the national standards for world and United States history were published last year, they ran into an explosion of negative commentary. Critics charged, among other things, that the standards had been written with a leftist, feminist, 'politically correct' bias, neglecting the accomplishments of any number of long-celebrated white males in favor of women and members of various minority groups.

By January of this year, the uproar had become sufficiently widespread to inspire a 99-1 vote in the United States Senate in favor of a resolution directing federal agencies to reject the proposals for national history standards. In an effort to save the very

2. Charlotte Crabtree and Gary B. Nash, preface to National Center for History in the Schools, *National Standards for United States History: Exploring the American Experience, Grades 5-12* Expanded Edition, [Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, University of California at Los Angeles, 1994], iii.

idea of national standards, three major foundations in June asked the Council for Basic Education to establish two panels, one to review the United States history standards, the other to take a look at the world history standards, which critics had tended to find biased against the Western tradition. Those panels reported last Thursday [October 12, 1995]. In brief, they recommended that the standards be revised, adopted, and issued without the teaching examples that have attracted most of the criticism. Gary B. Nash of UCLA, co-director of the project and a member of this Society, said he welcomed the recommendations, and for now the ball seems to be in his court.

My purpose here is not to plunge into a controversy which may, with some luck, be subsiding. However, it was not until I prepared this talk that I took the time to examine the standards with anything like the attention they deserve. Some of you may still be in that position, so let me pass on a couple of discoveries that may be of use, especially if the battle heats up again, as it well might.

The first point involves distortion. I want to quote from a speech given by a United States Senator widely regarded as a major national figure. A few paragraphs prior to the excerpt I'm about to read, the speaker had asserted that, 'Begun for the best of reasons and then hijacked by the Embarrassed-to-be-American crowd, certain Federal programs are untying the strings of citizenship.' Here's the quotation I'd like you to concentrate on:

Let me give you some examples of what I mean. The History Standards, prepared with over \$2 million in grants from the U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities, suggest that we teach our students about America by concentrating on some of our worst moments: the scourge of McCarthyism and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. George Washington is never even described as our first President in this approach. . . . And the first time the Constitution is mentioned it is blamed for sidetracking the movement to end slavery. After years of that, would you love America?³

3. Robert J. Dole, Speech to the American Legion Convention, Sept. 4, 1995.

Permit me now to read briefly from the standards. This comes from the introduction to 'Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s).' This excerpt follows a fairly long paragraph on the complex nature of the Revolution.

Students can appreciate how agendas for redefining American society in the postwar era differed by exploring how the Constitution was created and how it was ratified after a dramatic ideological debate in virtually every locale in 1787-88. While broaching the Constitution of 1787 and the Bill of Rights as the culmination of the most creative era of constitutionalism in American history, students should also ponder the paradox that the Constitution sidetracked the movement to abolish slavery that had taken rise in the revolutionary era. Nor should they think that ratification of the Constitution ended debate on governmental power; rather, economic, regional, social, and ideological tensions spawned continuing debates on the meaning of the Constitution.⁴

This introductory paragraph must be the one on which the Senator based the charge that 'the first time the Constitution is mentioned it is blamed for sidetracking the movement to end slavery.' I will leave it to you to decide which is closer to the truth: the standards' *caveat* about the Constitution and slavery or the Senator's *caveat* about the standards.

My second point involves omissions. As I read the critics, I was quite startled by their lists of things not included in the standards. Take, for example, what we just heard about the way 'this approach' fails to mention Washington as the first president. It does seem unreasonable, and perhaps even a little suspicious, to prescribe what should be essential to an education in American history without including Washington's presidency. A look at the standards reveals that they do not seek or claim to offer a comprehensive account of American history. Therefore, any number of significant 'facts' will not be found there. Lists of 'omissions' could go on for many pages. With respect to George Washington, what you will find is a standard that says, 'Students should be able to demonstrate understanding of the factors affecting the course

4. *National Standards for United States History*, 70.

of the war and contributing to the American victory by analyzing the character and roles of the military, political, and diplomatic leaders who helped forge the American victory,' and another requiring that they be able to 'explain the American victory.'⁵ Subsequent standards require that students 'demonstrate understanding of the issues involved in the creation and ratification of the United States Constitution and the new government it established,' and 'demonstrate understanding of the development of the first American party system.'⁶ None of these goals could, of course, be reached without an understanding of the crucial roles played by Washington in the war, the Constitutional Convention, the ratification process, the first presidential administration, and the origins and development of the Federalist and Republican parties. Any suggestion that the standards exclude Washington can therefore be attributed only to ignorance of the standards or, to return to my previous point, to a deliberate decision to distort them. My suggestion, in a word, is that the next time the standards appear, we all make a point of reading them before we try to make sense of any controversy they might attract. [The revised standards, *National Standards for History: Basic Documents* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, University of California at Los Angeles, 1996) were released on April 3, 1996. *Ed.*]

In the context of the standards, let me return to my image about American history as a ball of string, or should I say strings. I for one applaud historians who have the intellectual ambition to try writing accounts of the American past that will incorporate much of our new knowledge and new perspectives. All of us need to (you'll forgive me) keep our eye on the ball. This is especially true if we are designing curriculum, trying to define what students should learn and prescribing how to help them learn it. As much as we can, we have to make the pieces of that educational experience fit together in a comprehensible whole. On the other hand, professional scholars cannot enlist in a crusade to teach children

5. *National Standards for United States History*, 76.

6. *National Standards for United States History*, 84, 88.

to 'love America,' and call that history. However patriotic historians may be, or may want their children to be, they cannot, as historians, devote themselves to writing a catechism for someone's version of the civic religion. In saying this, I most emphatically do not mean to suggest that what professional scholars are up to must be essentially different from what is taught in the schools, or different from what the public does when it examines the past. To the contrary, what I want to suggest to you is that the two tracks may be converging, that the times in which we live may be calling historical professionals out of their libraries and offices and college classrooms and graduate seminars, inviting them to bring what is uniquely theirs out into a conversation with the interesting variety of people who mediate between what historians do as scholars and what the public learns about its history.

Part of what scholars bring with them, of course, is their specialized knowledge, but—much more important—they also bring their standards. They bring the rules of investigation and methods of reasoning about the past they have developed in the practice of their profession. They bring their constant concern that people think about the past not 'correctly' in the political sense but well. Gary Nash writes that 'We should be heartened that today's controversy over the history standards proves that history matters and that we have an unusual opportunity to reach a public that is interested in history, but not well informed about how historians ask new questions, find new sources of information, and construct new interpretations about the past.'⁷ How can scholars reach that public and help it become better informed about what historians do?

Perhaps the greatest disservice wrought by the controversy over the History Standards Project's report is the almost total oblivion into which it has tended to cast Chapter 2, 'Standards in Historical Thinking.' Let me quote the project on this: 'Beyond defining what students should *know*—that is, the understanding in

7. Gary B. Nash, 'The History Children Should Study,' *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 21, 1995, A60.

United States history that students should acquire—it is essential to consider what students should be able to *do* to demonstrate their understandings and to apply their knowledge in productive ways.⁷ In quite elaborate detail the project lays out the intellectual skills children should acquire in five categories: chronological thinking, historical comprehension, historical analysis and interpretation, historical research, and historical issue-analysis and decision-making.⁸ None of this can be accomplished through rote learning. To meet the proposed standards students must, instead, become their own historians. They can do that only by learning to interpret evidence about the past, precisely the craft about which no one knows more than the professional scholar.

It is good news, I think, that the review panels appointed by the Council for Basic Education have endorsed the standards project's quite emphatic commitment to historical thinking skills. That should mean that in the near future school systems and teachers throughout the United States will be studying the revised standards, issued without any teaching examples. That will start them searching for projects their students might undertake to achieve the ambitious learning goals set out for them. One place they will look for help, I hope, is to the people whose professional lives have been devoted to the challenge of interpreting evidence about the past.

But schoolteachers are only the most obvious of those who mediate between what scholars do and what the public learns about its history. All the more reason to note and to celebrate the initiatives undertaken in the last couple of years by the American Antiquarian Society with the help of the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. The Society now can offer visiting research fellowships to elementary and secondary schoolteachers and librarians—in itself a wonderful breakthrough—and also to creative and performing artists and writers. What happens when thoughtful and creative people who are not professional scholars get to come to this wonderful library and explore some of its prodigious re-

8. *National History Standards for United States History*, 7.

sources? Let me quote from John Hench in the latest issue of the Society's newsletter:

The academic fellows—professional researchers by definition—have been useful mentors for the school teachers and artists, particularly in conveying the nuances of current scholarship on key questions of mutual interest. Among their contributions to collegial interchange, the classroom teachers have provided insights into pedagogical techniques useful at any level of learning, while the artists and writers have offered up intriguing models of historical narrative and analysis beyond the traditional scholarly approaches.⁹

The question I posed in the title of this talk was whether the scholars' history can be the public's history. In one obvious sense, it cannot. Specialized research on topics unfamiliar to the general reader will continue to be the province of the professionals, in history as in every other discipline. But in other, important, ways, it seems that the divide between the scholars' history and the public's might in the coming years be bridged in new ways, and at strategic points. The scholars' history will become the public's to the extent that members of the public can bring to *their* encounter with the past not only curiosity, but training: instruction, guidance, and experience in scholarly ways of asking questions, evaluating evidence, and drawing inferences. Lay people who experience history as a disciplined encounter between the student and the sources will at the very least be forever liberated from the misconception that historical study is the progressive accumulation of 'facts' whose meaning is more or less self-evident. Lay people can become, not scholars in the professional sense, but what scholars really want and need them to be: eager yet critical consumers of historical literature in all its forms. They can come to appreciate history as an ongoing conversation that yields not final truths, but an endless succession of discoveries that change our understanding not only of the past, but of ourselves and of the times in which we live. This exchange should go in both direc-

9. John B. Hench, 'New Fellowships Launched,' *News-Letter of the American Antiquarian Society*, 53 (Aug. 1995): 7.

tions. Historians have learned a great deal from collaborating with other scholars, within and beyond their discipline. One of their next discoveries may be how much they have to learn from people who are not professionally engaged in the study of the past, but who are ready and willing to learn from historians how they do what they do. From them scholars will gain, I suspect, a strong dose of common sense, many a lesson in how to speak and write more plainly, and perhaps even an altered and enhanced appreciation of how important their work is.

When Isaiah Thomas and his associates collaborated to create and endow this institution, they took it for granted that the generations that followed them would forever strive to expand and deepen their understanding of the American past. They thought of the records they were collecting and preserving as the nation's inheritance, not their own. It's worth remembering that Thomas was different in at least one significant way from the lawyers and physicians and clergymen with whom he surrounded himself to get the Society off to a healthy start. He was the only one of the Worcester founders who did not have a college degree. In a world in which a liberal education was one of the major dividing lines between gentlemen and everyone else, Thomas drew upon his business earnings and his passion for history to carry him across the line, staking out a claim for himself as a scholar, and implicitly for American history as the province of whoever is ready to combine curiosity about the past with systematic investigation of the surviving evidence.

I have not meant to suggest this evening that the idea of bridging the gap is anything new. From Thomas's day to our own, some people have made efforts to see that the historical insights available to the social and intellectual elites found their way into American history as it was being taught in the schools and learned by the public at large. Throughout the twentieth century, certainly, some professional historians have collaborated with school-teachers and curriculum designers to bring the training of the professional to the service of the public. But I do offer a specula-

tion and a hope. The speculation, to repeat, is that we may have arrived at a new moment of opportunity—perhaps even at what some future historian might call ‘a turning point’—and the hope is that professionals in the broad field of American history, including professionals who support the endeavors of publishing scholars, like the superb staff of this magnificent library, may soon find themselves collaborating in fresh and stimulating ways not only with teachers, but also with filmmakers, sportswriters, actors, artists, musicians, broadcasters, poets, journalists, playwrights, and anyone else ready to join in what can be, as this splendid room constantly reminds us, a noble, even a majestic adventure.

Such is my speculation, and such is my hope. Whether they will be borne out by events, only history will tell.

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