

Does History Matter? Searching for the Past and the Future of our Nation

by

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Introduction

Thomas Cooper was a friend and political ally of Thomas Jefferson. He later became President of the University of South Carolina. He wrote and lectured about many topics. One of these was the place of historical knowledge in a society dedicated to the principle of democracy. In our own day we need to set aside the irony of speaking of democracy in a state featuring slavery. Nonetheless, his views resonate today. In 1826, in an address entitled "Of Police Laws Relating to Instruction and Education," he wrote that

There is no remedy against mistake or imposition of any kind, political, clerical, medical, or legal, but knowledge. There is no method of attaching the mass of the people to republican institutions, or of inducing them to prefer common sense to mystery, but by giving them information, and enabling them to think and reflect.

Again putting aside the irony that follows and instead focusing upon the larger point that a republic requires an educated population to fulfill its mission of maximizing individual freedom to the extent possible, Cooper states that

Ignorance is necessary to the continuance of slavery, whether the object be to keep the mind or the body, or both in chains. Hence throughout Europe, the dread of discussion; the tyrannical extent of the doctrine of libel; the morbid aversion of legitimacy to all mental improvement beyond mere scientific fact.

Therefore, the population must be encouraged to acquire as much knowledge as possible if America is to continue its democratic experiment and avoid the fate of a Europe in which the aristocracy and, as he puts it, “the priesthood regulates everything!” History is a vital ingredient here, and he said it should include a

. . . history of America and the American revolution, with the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States and of our own state . . .

Cooper’s argument echoes that of the nation’s founders – a democracy, at least as they envisioned it, rests upon a foundation of beliefs serving to perpetuate freedom. How are these convictions connected to the important role played by history?

This question takes us into the heart of the matter – history is important in this sense because the very idea of self-government demands a number of political traits impossible to develop in the absence of an historical consciousness. The *first* of these characteristics is the assumption that democratic self-government requires self-control. By self-control the revolutionary leadership of 1776 meant a curbing of the human tendency to pursue self-interest at the expense of the community. This is what James Madison had in mind when he warned against “the tyranny of their passions” in *Federalist Number 63*, referring of course to Athenians condemning Socrates to death. For Madison and other Revolutionary Era leaders, self-rule would be impossible to sustain when self-centered, unthinking passions and selfishness were exercised to the detriment of society. Closer to home and to our own day, this is what Congressman Barber B. Conable, one of the most important leaders ever produced in western New York, had in mind when he spoke of the importance of the Telluride Association, a gathering of students of which he had been a part while studying law at Cornell. This Association equated the healthy functioning of a republic with a recognition that there needs to be an encouragement of a “belief that practical work and accomplishment, as well as abstract study and intellectual growth, (remain) important to the development of character and judgment” necessary for self-rule.

Both Madison and Conable had the habit of reflection and self-control, and this also necessitated a *second* quality – that of the maintenance of institutions within which this self-control can be taught and perfected. What were these institutions? They included religious bodies, families, and schools. It should not surprise us, then, that the first federal legislation implemented to govern the western territories – what would be in the future the states of Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and Illinois – the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 – stressed that “religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

Integral here is the role played by history. As the leaders of the American Revolution understood, a lasting and well-functioning democracy rests upon principles of liberty, widespread opportunity, and the availability of justice – none of which can last in the absence of knowledge regarding how those societal features came into being, and by extension, how they can be preserved. In a democratic setting, history is not a luxury – it is an absolute political requirement.

Our state of New York is a national leader in this regard, stressing as it does the connection between democratic self-rule and the role played by legally-mandated public historians in accordance with the Historians Law of 1919, which has translated into a rich tradition of historical enterprises ranging from books and pamphlets to newspaper articles and public lectures and exhibitions focusing upon the dramatic stories and traditions of the Empire State. But this runs counter to a national trend with disturbing implications – there are far too many people who fail to see the relationship between a functioning democracy and an informed citizenry. Some examples of what is tantamount to an assault on democracy via a struggle against the necessity of historical knowledge were evident as America moved into the twenty-first century. In a federal study undertaken by the United States Department of Education, it was revealed that by 1999 almost sixty percent of high school seniors lacked even the most rudimentary grasp of United States history. By that same year a Gallup Poll indicated that a quarter of college seniors were unable to come within fifty years of identifying the date of Christopher Columbus’s initial voyage. That same poll

concluded that forty percent of college seniors had no idea when the Civil War took place. Most could not identify the basic outlines of World Wars One and Two. A *New York Times* report of 1995 disclosed that less than half of American adults knew that the United States and the Soviet Union had been allies in World War Two, while yet another Gallup Poll revealed that sixty percent of adult Americans were unable to identify the president who ordered that the atomic bomb be dropped on Japan. Indeed, twenty-two percent had no idea that such an incident ever took place.

The question, then, is what this all means for the future of our nation. My point tonight has already been suggested – the lack of historical consciousness – or even of basic historical knowledge – is a dangerous development working to place our republic in peril. History needs to occupy a central place in our culture because without it the responsible exercise of democratic participation is endangered. It is a moral requirement of civic participation; an involvement in the continuous effort to provide as much individual freedom, opportunity, and justice as possible. The rights – and the duties – of free people depend upon knowledge of where we have been – and where we may be heading. Once again, we return to James Madison who, in 1822, said simply, in a comment on Kentucky law, that

The liberal appropriations made by the legislature of Kentucky for a general system of education cannot be too much applauded. . . Learned institutions ought to be the favorable objects with every free people. They throw that light over the public mind which is the best security against crafty and dangerous encroachments on the public liberty. . . What spectacle can be more edifying than that of liberty and learning, each leaning on the other for their mutual and surest support?

How history supports the pillars of a free society – liberty, opportunity, and justice – is therefore the focus of what remains of this talk tonight. Just as importantly, how that perspective manifested itself both nationally – and here in

Genesee County – is one that demands our attention, for to ignore the place of history in the maintenance of a republic is to risk creating an America in which an apathetic population is content with little say in how life is lived. Liberty is dependent upon a confidence and competence having as its foundation an awareness of, and sensitivity to, how things came to be.

Democracy and the Demand for History

C.W. Canfield, an attorney in Batavia, delivered a speech on the 4th of July celebration in that town in 1823. As reported in the *Spirit of the Times*, he reminded his listeners that a study of the past reveals why democracy in the young nation will last:

History, indeed, tells us, that all nations have tended toward decay; but it also teaches us the sad cause, and its warning voice is raised to inculcate this salutary maxim, that nations are, in general, the masters of their own destiny; and that national immortality can only be secured by preserving in all its purity, national and individual virtue.

For Canfield, democracy, virtue, and history functioning as a teacher are all inextricably intertwined. Put simply, the centrality of historical knowledge in a public setting, for example, serves to inculcate habits of rights and duties without which self-rule could not last. Foreign visitors to the young republic saw the necessity of this as readily as someone such as Batavia's Canfield. The most famous here was the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville. In the classic *Democracy in America*, first published in 1838, de Tocqueville argues that history is the primary vehicle for the promotion of democratic values and a sense of national identity – the latter being especially crucial in a nation of people with such a wide variety of backgrounds. It is this sense of a shared history that forms the basis for what some would later call a “consensus” in American life; in other words, a shared sense of values inherited from the past. Tocqueville therefore wrote that there is

A middling standard (which) has been established in America for all human knowledge. All minds come near to it, some by raising and some by lowering their standards.

As a result one finds a vast multitude of people with roughly the same ideas about religion, history, science, political economy, legislation, and government.

What was eventually called “consensus” was what was thought of as political “virtue” in the eighteenth century. Be it consensus or virtue, it all meant the same thing – that what defines us as Americans, as adherents to a commonly agreed upon constellation of values, is a core of common beliefs that could not be fully comprehended unless they were seen as products of the past. The danger lies in not knowing what – or where – these American values are, or where they originated. Allowed to go unheeded, this problem could eventually produce a crisis tearing apart the fabric of American society.

What, then, were these components of American democracy? Just as importantly, how can history play a part in transmitting them from one generation to the next? One obvious example is the typical nineteenth book used by schoolchildren. The authors of such texts understood that they were using the past to educate a future electorate, one that would hopefully remain loyal to the United States. As the role of government was seen by many as one ideally limited, it was particularly important to inculcate a voluntary loyalty in an America that rejected the idea of a tyranny resting upon the physical coercion of its people. The core values of individual uniqueness, equality of opportunity, hope for the future, the necessity of helping those in distress, a strong work ethic, and a pragmatism stressing the desire to get things done, are all rooted in a past that remains with us because people voluntarily submit themselves to ideas about how to live that are not the consequence of brute force exercised by the government. Accordingly, an 1832 textbook by B.B. Edwards, entitled *The Eclectic Reader*, stressed that

Men love their country when the good of

every particular man is comprehended in the public prosperity, and the success of their achievements is improved to the general advantage. They undertake hazards and labors for the government, when it is justly administered; when innocence is safe, and virtue honored. . .

The acknowledgement of Edwards that civic participation emerges from a belief in what it means to be an American who is not the product of a coercive tyranny but, instead, is one who voluntarily accepts values transmitted from one generation to the next, is a view not only evident in a nationally used textbook such as *The Eclectic Reader*, but, in addition, is a perspective seen locally in Genesee County during that same period. Public pronouncements, church sermons, and parental teachings all drew upon the conveyance of these core values from one generation to the next. For example, look at an article, again in *Batavia's Spirit of the Times*, dated July 25th, 1823. In a discussion of the political role played by clergy drawing upon the past to cultivate a belief in the link between tradition and democracy, we find references to

. . . the patriotic devotion of the clergy generally to the cause of the revolution, and the recommendation of the Provincial Congress that ministers of parishes should on other occasions than the stated service of the Sabbath, adapt their discourses to the times, and explain the nature of civil and religious liberty and the duties of magistrates and rulers.

In another example from the *Spirit of the Times* appearing on August 15th, 1866, the readers were told of the intimate relation between a democratic society and sensitivity to the role history plays in fostering democracy. The connection was embodied in a consistent reference to that crucial document from the past – the United States Constitution:

It is the unquestionable right of the people of the United States to make such changes in the Constitution as they, upon due deliberation, may deem expedient. But we insist that they shall be made in the mode which the Constitution itself points out – in conformity with the letter and the spirit of that instrument, and with the principles of self-government and of equal rights which lie at the basis of our republican institutions.

This excerpt from the front page of a newspaper in Batavia captures the inexorable nexus between democracy and history in American life – put simply; generations of Americans have defined themselves *as* Americans who inherently endorse self-rule by consistently turning their attention to the past. Be it the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, or the Gettysburg Address (memorized by generations of American schoolchildren) – the nation’s history had as its unique mission the preservation of the republic. Understanding the necessity of this historical consciousness, liberty – that cornerstone of democracy – produced a series of Heroic Ages that served as the ideological glue between the generations, be the Heroic Age of the Revolution, or of the Civil War, or of inventors, or of the Greatest Generation. Liberty, like the broader concept of democracy, demands its heroes – and its history.

History as the Cornerstone of Liberty

As all here would most likely agree, much has been said about the uniqueness of America. Nonetheless, it is easy to forget that over time there has been much anxiety about the differences evident among the people of the United States. Our history has not been a simple matter of political integration that commenced with thirteen former colonies managing to overcome their antagonisms in order to form a republic. The apprehension long evident in American culture grew out of different religious traditions, differences between immigrants groups, distinctions between naturalized citizens and those native born, etc. How could such an array of people be unified? Clearly, this apprehensive quality discernible in American

life on a national level reared its head in Genesee County. Accordingly, in an article entitled “Is the Union in Danger?” appearing in the November 26th, 1850 edition of *The Republican Advocate* in Batavia, the focus was upon the necessity of reestablishing the traditional values of the republic which were viewed as under assault due to differences between the northern and southern states and the religious and demographic dissimilarities going along with this:

This momentous question, fifteen or twenty years since would have been deemed preposterous, and the person proposing it a fit candidate for Bedlam. Then everything but Liberty itself would have been sacrificed to perpetuate the glorious UNION formed by the patriotism of our Revolutionary Ancestors, whose blood was poured out upon so many battlefields, and whose treasure flowed so freely in the hallowed cause. The glories, the beauties, and the advantages of our Union were the common theme of congratulation throughout the country.

But how is it now? Do our people still cherish that ardent love of Union which has hitherto characterized them?

In such newspaper accounts one can see the necessity of establishing and maintaining a self-image serving to define what it means to be an American. Alluding to the War for Independence was not enough, especially as it conjured up images of law, language, and institutions derived from very people rebelled against – the English. This was now modern America by the mid-nineteenth century, and while lip service could be paid to the “revolutionary ancestors” one could not fully embrace a colonial period decidedly different from the one described in Batavia’s *Republican Advocate*. While religious freedom was sacrosanct, colonial groups, such as the Puritans, really had little place in the America unfolding by the eve of the Civil War. Puritan clergy such as Nathaniel

Ward, writing of “tolerance” which by its very nature “stinks in God’s nostrils,” ran counter to an understanding of *liberty* which had developed in a very different direction and which was viewed as a foundation of democracy itself by the late eighteenth century. History was the evolution of liberty, and democracy itself was dependent upon it. American history was the story of progress in terms of individual rights – and without individual rights there could not be an America. To fully comprehend the emergence of freedom in America one had to acknowledge the relevance of the past – and how it is, as Jefferson put it, a new “chapter in the history of man . . .” and to appreciate that “the great extent of our republic is new.”

But one also had to have a firm grasp of liberty – and how it has been altered since the days of such Puritan leaders as Ward. By the nineteenth century *liberty*, as a basis for democracy, meant freedom in a political sense. This meant that one had the ability to act against authority – but of course, it did not stop there. It also translated into an autonomous individual capable of standing against opinions of others, the customs of others; indeed, against what Sigmund Freud once termed “the compact majority.” This liberty is not natural, for it is the product of an historical evolution taking many generations. To exercise it, then, one has to be cognizant of how this historical dynamic happened. It means a history of dissent. This is *not* the same as freedom, for someone can offer an unpopular opinion when one is alone – but *liberty* means that one can offer an unpopular view when others can hear it and not suffer such consequences as imprisonment. Hence it thrives in an America devoid of dependency – if someone is reliant upon someone else for their economic well-being then that person’s subordination undermines the ability to express one’s views. It does not matter what form that dependency takes – its very presence is a threat to liberty, that hallmark of democracy. Therefore, what does history teach? It teaches that opportunity, like liberty, is a cornerstone of democracy.

The Need to Recognize the Place of Opportunity in American Life

In American life liberty and democracy are inseparable from the workings of a market economy. While views about *how* a market-based economy should be

organized have varied widely throughout American history, few have rejected the idea in its entirety. Some have long called for more governmental interaction with the economic system, while others have called for less. But all have agreed – and this could clearly have been included in the core American values constituting the consensus spoken of earlier – that a healthy market economy can only last if opportunity for those seeking it is as widely available as possible. Indeed, a lack of opportunity is seen not only as undemocratic, but in fact, as outright un-American. The possibility of improving one's life means more liberty, as one is not as dependent as one with limited economic resources. The lack of material assets necessarily translates into a feudal-like society in which growing numbers of people rely upon others for survival, a situation standing in stark opposition to what one should reasonably expect in America. This is the underlying theme of an article appearing in Batavia's *Daily News* on the eve of the momentous presidential election in the fall of 1932. On October 12th of that year, with national unemployment running at twenty-five percent, the readers were told that

City Welfare Relief Costs Are Staggering

With expenses of the city welfare department rising to a point where they threaten to become no less than half of the entire cost of city government, the advisory committee on municipal relief affairs has presented to the Common Council a program designed to promote efficiency in administering relief and cutting down the appalling costs to the taxpayers.

The writer of this article then goes on to say that

Food is the major portion of the bill for aiding the unemployed and needy poor and the commission proposes alternative methods for reducing it. One of the proposals is a plan

of having prices of commodities fixed for each week and food requests checked over before the orders are issued. It has been found that some merchants charge 50 per cent more than others for the same items. The alternative plan provides for a city commissary with supplies purchased at wholesale.

Five Hundred Families

The committee expects that 500 families will be dependent on the city during the coming winter . . .

At moments such as the depths of the Great Depression the role played by history in the functioning of the American system of free enterprise clearly comes into play. The stress placed on private initiative in the organization of resources that translate into opportunity is largely the result of cultural values routinely inculcated from an early age. In other words, there is a culture of capitalism resulting from a variety of sources surrounding each of us – literature, the law, mass media, and *history*. These values – hard work, delayed gratification, the worth of competition, self-discipline, etc. have over time been incorporated into our understanding of how our economy developed. This is the stuff of history textbooks, novels, sermons, popular expressions, and a host of other cultural expressions following each of us from home to classroom to the wider community – from cradle to grave. What was so emotionally devastating to many in 1932 was how an economic catastrophe developed even when people lived as they believed it was expected to live – indeed, natural to live. America shrinks when opportunity contracts, hence, it is crucial to draw upon the past in order to keep alive the belief that America equals opportunity.

So how have economic downturns such as the Great Depression been portrayed? Ironically, here the Depression serves as an object lesson in how America *remains* a land of opportunity. For instance, in another article in the *Daily News*, this one also appearing on the 12th of October in 1932, we find former president Calvin Coolidge featured. This was a long article which depicted the

Depression as a consequence of too many Americans who had moved away from traditional American values, which had the effect of producing a severe economic downturn and the consequent result of a diminishment of opportunity. We are told that too many people had come to believe that *immediate* gratification, as opposed to *delayed* gratification, was somehow an inalienable right. As a result, self-restraint and self-discipline had yielded to an overextension of credit and unmanageable debt levels – debts which included the purchase of stock in the 1920s by too many who really could not afford it. The belief in sustained hard work was replaced by a desire to get rich quick and engage in a life of idleness and leisure uninterrupted by the demands of a competitive workplace. Former President Coolidge castigates those who, now finding themselves desperate, seek to trade what is left of their independence for sustained governmental support:

Given the problem then of restoring to normal well-being a great mass of people who find themselves unemployed, the fundamental remedy is not some form of pauperism, but a return to self-respecting, self-supporting and independent existence.

For Coolidge – and by implication for the editorial staff of the *Daily News* – the Great Depression, and its evaporation of economic opportunity, came out of the simple fact that too many Americans – in Genesee County and elsewhere – had turned away from the truths of our past. Not remembering their history, which meant losing a big part of our national identity, meant that progress itself had been abruptly halted. America had not come to occupy a unique role in human history because people sought to get rich quick and easy. Instead, that uniqueness, what some still call American exceptionalism, was the result of a society that, with all of its shortcomings, placed the uniqueness of the individual at the forefront of our grandest hopes and dreams for the future. Americans had misplaced their most enlightened principles regarding individual responsibility by the 1920s, and were paying the price. The solution was a return to the most cherished ideas about how to best conduct one's life, and history itself remained the most effective guide in this search. But opportunity becomes more than a

theory when it is expressed in reality, and for it to be a reality, it must be supported by sound principles of justice, complete with courts capable of converting those theories into actuality. Once again, looking to the past enables us to do more than talk about such notions as fairness and justice.

Law and the Role of History

While textbooks, sermons, and mass media, to name but a few areas of American life, stressed the idea of liberty and how it is kept alive by a continuous reference to the past, it must quickly be added that for Americans freedom is not unlimited. Allusions to the past also reminded generations of Americans that liberty itself has a master. Who is that master? The master is, of course, the law. Our behavior is circumscribed by a series of restraints – and duties – ideally fashioned to perpetuate liberty. The past teaches us that unchecked liberty degenerates into chaos, which, by definition, negates freedom. We are taught from early childhood on that laws are designed to advance what is good for all of us. History is the primary vehicle for teaching those lessons, so once again, we see that history matters – for without it, we run the risk of jeopardizing a republic in which liberty itself depends upon the law.

It is a common maxim in American life that we are a country guided by the rule of law instead of one guided by human beings. The idea is straightforward – our system is one of universally applied neutral rules – as free people, we cannot be guided by the arbitrary and unpredictable dictates of leaders who change their minds from one moment to the next. Not only does the rule of law reduce the possibility of governmental abuse, but additionally, it means that government officials are themselves subject to the law, and that we, the people, enjoy protections from public and private violence and coercion.

All of this is mere rhetoric unless it is anchored in a popular acceptance of the law. Therefore, examples drawn from the past inculcate the idea that the rule of law is desirable and necessary if the words *liberty* and *democracy* are to have any meaning. The law maintains its authority if an examination of the past indicates that such authority, such legitimacy, emerges from a willingness of people to accept the law and its institutions. But if the law comes across as unfair and

arbitrary, then the basis upon which it stands is jeopardized. Accordingly, so too is the very idea of the rule of law.

Here is where history plays such a pivotal role. The past works to present the law as the facilitator of liberty and democracy, and nowhere is this clearer than in the homage paid to the Constitution of the United States. In effect, the Constitution is an expression of American notions of liberty backed up with the force of the law and its institutions. The Constitution demands that there be no ex post facto laws, and that there are procedures in place to ensure adequate protections. Popular indignation when such aspects of the Constitution are violated is really an expression of outrage over a perceived gap between what the law purports to be and what it sometimes is. The trick is to return it to where it should be.

An illustration here is the idea that the rule of law necessitates the constitutional separation of powers. When the executive power is used inappropriately, liberty can be replaced by what the Founders referred to as tyranny. The local reaction to the crisis of Watergate sheds light on how the authority of such institutions as the Presidency is weakened when there is executive overreach. Less than two months before the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon, the *Daily News* in Batavia ran a front page article on June 21st, 1974. Entitled “White House Interns Encounter Watergate’s Impact,” the writer portrays the diminishment of status interns experienced in what had been, prior to the crisis, a prestigious internship in the White House. One student spoke of such reactions as these:

You say you’re working at the White House,
and you run into a lot of verbal abuse
sometimes . . . “

Immediately above this article, on that same front page, a headline blared that “Colson, Nixon Adviser, Draws 1-3 Jail Term” for the obstruction of justice.

So here, on this same page, one witnesses the irony – high-ranking public officials using their office to undermine the protections enunciated in the

Constitution. But this does not lead to despair, for the same judicial process is subsequently used to rein in a tyranny that otherwise may have gone unchecked. The rule of law triumphed over the rule of people, and history – enshrined in the Constitution written in the eighteenth century and in the survival of our legal and political system beyond 1974 – is the primary vehicle for the preservation, indeed, of the encouragement, for the centrality of the rule of law. That basic American tenet has survived many assaults throughout American history, and only through a sustained consideration of our past can that – and democracy itself – be fully appreciated. As Barber B. Conable once put it in a reference to democracy, our form of government

. . . does not rely on philosopher kings.
It relies on people who have representative
views and express them effectively.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this essay I have emphasized the important role played by history in a person's understanding of the nation's past – and where that past may be taking us, both in and outside of Genesee County. A central component of this role is the link between the need to be aware of the past in order to ensure the continued functioning of a democratic republic. Our concern about the past, indeed, our engagement with it, comes out of questions we have about the meaning of our existence – both as human beings in the broadest sense and as Americans; indeed, as residents of Genesee County in a more narrow sense. As we ponder that existence and look backward in order to understand where we are now and where we may be going, it is natural to want to ignore, or even suppress, aspects of our society that make us uncomfortable. There is an old expression relevant here – what one does not know cannot be harmful. Let me suggest that this is a questionable perspective, for what one does not know is most likely, in the end, to hurt the most. To be unaware is to not know of reality. One's unawareness of how things were – and are – decreases a person's access to information, and a dwindling of knowledge restricts the choices available to us.

In other words, the health of a community – of a nation – requires memory. Democracy demands memory. Liberty means a freedom of inquiry in which we agree to disagree. As Americans, it is incumbent upon us to remain committed to the intellectual tradition of pursuing truth – regardless of where it leads us. History affords us not only a record of what has happened – the Constitution, a document from the eighteenth century, survives despite the Watergate crisis – but it also offers a variety of tools that work to give us hope instead of despair for the future. Historical analysis teaches us how Americans have maintained democracy – which means the maintenance of freedom itself.