CLIO IN PUBLIC: SCHOLARSHIP OR STRIPTEASE?

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I.

Almost every month for many years, I have attended a meeting in Nashville of what is called the First Thursday Group. It consists of the directors of historical organizations in the area -- historical societies, museums, historic houses, historic sites, archives, and historic preservation agencies. The purpose is to keep in touch -- keep special events from being scheduled on the same day, find out what really happened when somebody in the history business gets fired, meet that person's eventual replacement, crow over successes, and have shoulders to cry on when things go wrong. The bylaws are deleberately simple: no officers, dues, newsletter, publicity, and no other bylaws. Each of us brings a five-dollar bill to pay for a highly fattening box lunch, arranged for by the person in whose cluttered office we meet. I go because it provides me insight into a microcosmic cross section of the membership of my association nationally -- and because otherwise I never have an excuse anymore to eat a fattening box lunch.

But something rather startling happened on my way to the last meeting. I don't know why I never noticed it before. I must have passed by it a thousand times in downtown Nashville. It's on the way to and from my office in the historic River-Front District where the city began. And I suppose I have noticed it. But for once I stopped and really took it in.

I'm talking about a big iron plaque, embedded in the concrete corner of a nondescript business building -- a heavy, dark, rectangular historic marker, its message immortalized in thick raised metallic letters. I paused to see what it said, which in its entirety is as follows: "The Old Fort and Stockade of the Robertson party established here in 1779. First marriage of the settlement celebrated in fort in 1820. Captain James Leiper and Miss Susan Drake. Erected by Exchange Club 1928."

"Well, there you have it," I thought, "a bit of history you might otherwise have missed." I tried for a moment to imagine brown logs in place of the gray concrete, some handsome captain in a coonskin cap and an army jacket exchanging vows with a radiant young beauty in a long white gown of hardy homespun, and somebody named Robertson keeping lookout against the threat of hostile Chickasaws. I tried to imagine all that, I say -- but failed, whether because the present office building encumbrance was too overwhelming, or because contemporary Pontiacs and

Cherokee Jeeps were rumbling and honking behind me, I am not sure. But the dominant images soon became the fried chicken and the pecan pie that awaited me in the box lunch, and I moved on.

Well, although at the time I did not suspect a connection, the First Thursday Group that day seemed in particularly fine fettle. In came the director of the Hermitage, almost apoplectic in his eagerness to unveil for us the plan to build a big new interpretive center to tell the story of Andrew Jackson, his generalship and presidency, through exhibits, lectures, and films for the thousands of visitors who come by the busload every year to view the grand historic residence. In came the director of Traveller's Rest, the historic house that belonged to Judge John Overton, a political crony of Andrew Jackson and a leading citizen of the Nashville community in its early days. Fresh research would mean a new interpretive program when spring brought fresh hordes to that site, he announced, meaning that he had retrained all the volunteer docents, or guides. Close on his heels arrived the director of Belle Meade, an antebellum plantation famous for race horses near Nashville. Special events scheduled on the grounds and at the carriage house there were worrying her again -- where was she going to provide parking for all the vans and RV's?

The director arrived from the Tennessee State Museum and plunged into her cold chicken with the enthusiasm that can come only from successful fundraising. Not only had the Legislature appropriated money to complete the exhibits on Tennessee in the New South and Twentieth Century, but private donors had signed checks for a traveling exhibition on the myths of Dixie and for artifacts from Korea and Vietnam to be included in the physically separate military museum. Another group member announced the name of the lecturer scheduled for the next month's meeting of the Tennessee Historical Society and showed previously unpublished photographs he had turned up for an article for the Tennessee Historical Quarterly. Someone from the Tennessee Historical Commission announced how wonderful it was to fly down to the Alamo in Texas with a select group of history-minded high school students -- 33 of them, which just happened to be both the number of senatorial districts in Tennessee and the number of Tennesseans who died at the side of Davy Crockett. Or was it 32? Anyway, the senators picked the students, and they all felt moved and illuminated to see the actual site.

Someone showed up from Historic Nashville, Inc., to say that -- once again -- there seemed a good chance old Union Station would be saved from the wrecking ball, and would we please replace the old bumper stickers on our cars with the new ones that like the old ones said: "Save Historic Union Station." The director from the Metro Historical Commission came to ask if some of us could turn out at the next zoning commission meeting when a

public hearing would be held on creation of a historic neighborhood in an old part of East Nashville.

We also heard from the Historic Belmont Association, Nashville Collection at the Public Library, and Alice Algood who is a member of the National Museum Services Board, the Colonial Dames, Society for the Preservation of Tennessee Antiquities, and I don't know how many other historical organizations. About the only person who wasn't there was the head of the Tennessee State Archives, so we all speculated about whether he really would be able to keep it open to the public, particularly genealogists, in evenings and on weekends.

And then somebody asked -- "Did you follow the series on Mountbatten and the history of the Independence of India on TV?" And somebody said, "It wasn't as good as the movie series on Conan the Barbarian. Now that's history." And we laughed.

And me -- what did I do?

Well, I told them about the new Living History Sourcebook AASLH has just published about the phenomenal growth in this country of living-history farms and craft demonstrations, of groups re-enacting everything from battles to gatherings of mountain men, of citizens spending their vacation retracing historic trails, and a range of other activities requiring historical knowledge and even authentic costumes and equipment from another era. I also told them of a new manual on museum planning we are publishing so that all of the people calling us every month about starting a museum would have some idea of what they were getting into. And I told them that we had gone to press with the new Directory of Historical Organizations in the United States and Canada which we publish every two or three years. It will appear this month, as a matter of fact, with nearly 10,000 entries -- more than twice as many as in the last edition of 1982. Take all those nonprofit, public-service, historical organizations in Nashville that were represented at the First Thursday Group, multiply them by the rest of North America, and 10,000 is the minimum number you get.

The pecan pie was delicious. But what made me groggy as I wandered back to work that day was the realization that had come over me -- that hit me most fully as once again I found myself stopping to read that sign about Captain Leiper, his bride, and the first settlement. Should we take history to the public or not is a question only university professors and maybe association directors could consider seriously. History is already there. The public is up to its proboscis in history. If you go out at all these days, you can hardly help but run into it. That sign I was looking at had by National Register standards become historic itself; the citizens of the Exchange Club put it up in 1928, more than 50 years ago.

"Clio," I said softly -- "What a strumpet you have become, offering yourself even from the street corners."

II.

But -- I did not go back to work right away that day. I got a half block beyond my thoughts and that historical marker, and then I turned back, retraced my steps, and stared at it again. For clearly it had something more to say.

At first glance, it had seemed of merely marginal importance: the fort location, who first got married there, and names. But -- somebody had set those modest fruits of historical investigation not only into the proverbial concrete, but into literal steel as well. I am not aware that the writings of Herodotus or Thucydides, of Gibbon or Macaulay, or least of all of Leopold Von Ranke, have been so emphatically, indeed ineradicably, set up in a public place for the instruction of citizens. Somebody with influence at the Exchange Club obviously intended to impress this information on public passers-by in Nashville throughtout the ages. One thinks back for comparison to the famous admonition left by the heroic Spartans on the battlefield at Thermopylae: "Stranger, tell them in Lakedaimon that we lie here obedient to their will."

Well, that's a little loftier, perhaps. But the real message of the marker in my hometown is not just about Robertson, the stockade, or the betrothal of Drake and Leiper. Otherwise, more than their names would be given. Instead, that marker is a statement about what seemed important for somebody to remember in 1928.

I'll bet you ten bucks that the president of the Exchange Club then was a direct descendent of the union of Leiper and Drake, or married to one, but that doesn't matter. What matters -- that is, what the sign says matters is this: marriage matters, successful settlement matters, origins matter, connections with the past matter. And so does a sense of place. What happened in Nashville to get it going matters in part because of what Nashville has become. Look again at the tall office building in whose cornerstone the sign is imbedded. Going from a log fort and a first marriage to a city of nearly a half-million, crammed full of mansions and museums, in something less than two centuries -- that matters. And those kinds of things matter to a lot of the public that today hungers for history.

But is that a hunger that serious historians can serve? Or is it a hunger for the pecan pie of parochialism and patriotic pride, the fried chicken of ancestral veneration?

First, I can tell you this. It is legitimate enough that scores of American universities are now purporting to prepare history students for employment in institutions that provide public education in history. I'm speaking of the popping up all over the place of graduate or undergraduate programs in public history, historical administration, archival administration, museum studies, cultural resource management, and so forth. Several of these programs have existed for years, are staffed with truly competent faculty in the field, and successfully do prepare students to pursue careers in it. But many others seem to be the last-ditch idea of some dean to prevent further enrollment drops in traditional history departments. My association annually co-sponsors a seminar in historical administration at Colonial Williamsburg, and has done so every summer for a quarter century and more. Recently we have been getting applications to it from university professors who find themselves assigned to teach public history the next fall and need to learn something about it. Some of these programs are scandalously hypocritical in their representations to students, which is why my association has published guidelines for what good graduate programs require to train public historians of many sorts. And simultaneously I am working directly with some new university progams where the intent, at least, is serious and conscientious, because I do believe that solid university programs will become the principal preparation in the future for people planning to work with history in public institutions.

But that alone won't resolve historians' concerns about public interests. Let's look at that more narrowly. Let's look at my neighborhood.

Green Hills, whose name has been appropriated by a giant shopping center ringed with complexes of apartment houses, in an old, established residential area in Nashville, reduced now to a mere sliver of the city, more or less three blocks wide and three blocks long. I live in it. I live in a modest stone house rather difficult to describe by any recognized architectural term. A friend of mine who is an architectural historian once concluded that it might be "Gothic Bungalow." When development pressures on Green Hills got so great that just two blocks away from my gothic bungalow a hotel was proposed, my wife, who is an attorney, organized the Green Hills Neighborhood Association, which persuaded the city council to stop the hostelry. At one of the Neighborhood Association Meetings, some of the members said to me: "You know, it could help us in this fight if we knew the history of this area. The Civil War went right through here, didn't it?"

Well, as a matter of fact, some minor part of the Battle of Nashville late in the war did occur on my lawn, though if I were to do the history of the neighborhood, I would not dwell on that. But my brave neighbors had hit upon an important fact: an

assertable history can help one command respect. One can even defend one's turf with it.

Nobody knows that better than people who previously have been unjustly denied respect. Consider the present attention of racial minority groups to their heritages. The Dusable Museum of Afro-American Art and History in Chicago is one of many such institutions that are founded on the message that the Dusable's director, Margaret Boroughs, meant it to give to black people: "Your heritage shall be your weapon and your armor."

There are so many Black museums today that they have established a National Association of African-American Museums, just as the people we used to call Indians have created the Native American Museum Association. Our bi-monthly magazine, History News, has reported as well on the work of museums and historical societies devoted to the culture and historical experience in this country of citizens of Hispanic and Asiatic ancestry. Many other museums today, even those focused on cultural heritages that are essentially Western European, at least point out the historical fact that not all Americans have been White Anglo-Saxon Protestant middle-aged male pillars of some Green Hills community like myself.

Women, for example. But then I hardly have to tell this audience about the political overtones of the historiographical quarrels attending the rise to academic acceptance of women's studies, or the history of family life. Indeed, the entire contemporary emphasis on the so-called new social history -- "Ordinary People and Everyday Life," as a book on the subject published by my association is called -- or "History From the Bottom Up" as some have seen it -- generally is defended by historians who fancy themselves political radicals, and tends to be denigrated by neo-classical political conservatives.

As no less a historical scholar than Carl Degler has written, in the Chronicle of Higher Education: ". . . as human beings, women need history too. They need history that includes them . . . ."

But who doesn't need to see themselves in history?

Some historical societies have wanted history restricted to pioneers and patriots, founders and famous citizens, the revolution and Civil War. But others have organized to support archival and museum activities focused on ethics groups -- often the recent immigrants, who otherwise have felt excluded. Irish and Italians, Lithuanians and Poles, Swedes and Norwegians -- you name it and we've got their historical organizations listed in our Directory at some length.

Labor unions and labor historians don't think the country's history should center around Cargnegie, Mellon, and Ford. But

old Henry himself complained that political heroes had crowded industrialists out. When he made the famous proclamation about history being bunk, he certainly did not mean the kind of history he financed at the huge, professionally administered Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village complex in Michigan, which includes Edison's Laboratory and the Wright Brother's Bicycle Shop. There the public learns that technology, too, made American great, not just Washington, Jefferson, and General Grant, or young Jim Leiper and sweet Susie Drake.

But of course it has been obvious all along to you as well as to me that history itself is a public battleground. Sometimes history seems almost exclusively the study of who and what deserves to get in it. As anybody who has ever been close to a high-school textbook dispute well knows, history is of enormous public importance. American parents will go to the barricades over what kind of attention a textbook gives -- or doesn't give -- to the slave experience, to take but one example. Out of all the things tht have ever happened, history is what humans choose to remember. For CLIO, you see, is not so whorish after all. In public, at least, she has never been willing, and may not even be able, to dance with just anyone.

III.

Now, let me sum up for a moment. What have I tried to say? Despite all my elaboration, I think it's no more than this: First, off-campus at least, the public is seeking and even supporting all kinds of historical activity. And second, history really matters to the public. It inevitably deals with issues of identification, validation, recognition, evaluation, understanding who we are, where we are, what we have got to show for ourselves as humans, as groups, as communities.

Also, more than you may realize, if you don't get around to historical agency activities as much as I do, the public finds history fun. Whether scholars or citizens, we don't always know why bits of history seem so fascinating. But for so many of us, they do. And on that note, one last word about my Nashville historical sign.

Its message, in itself, is superficial. But it is enough to tease my imagination, which is the whole purpose of historical signs, to make me want to know more. The cryptic "Robertson" I can identify from a number of other sources around town. He led one of the two parties that founded Nashville one the banks of the Cumberland. But Leiper and Drake?

Instead of my romantic image , were they actually fat and forty, wearing satin and hats of beaver skin? What was family life really like on the Southern frontier? What brought such people there to start anew? What did it all mean to them?

Like all citizens, I need solid scholarship to tell me. And I happened to know where I can get it. Anita Goodstein at Sewanee University will tell me in her journal articles on frontier social life in Middle Tennessee. Don Doyle at Vanderbilt University will help with his new two-volume study of Nashville as part of American urban history. James Hoobler also will assist me with his original research for the tours, public programs, and periodicals of the Tennessee Historical Society. James Kelly will tell me - he is the historian whose scholarship supports the new history exhibits at the Tennessee State Museum. And Jack Cooke,who teaches in the adult education extension of Tennessee State University, will tell me.

All are trained scholars, though they do historical work in different kinds of institutions, and use various devices to bring the fruits of their scholarship into view. And I, as a citizen of a community, state, country, and planet need them all.

Don't we have an obligation to each other, me to respect real research, and you to make it accessible to the public?

But what I really think, you see, is that the sign I have been talking about is an original source document, an ancient inscription to be deciphered. "Robertson" is actually an old Indian word meaning God. The stockade is a symbol for the unassailable Garden of Eden. Leiper is that upstart, innocently hopeful thing, humanity. And the street-corner memorial is a celebration of humanity's co-habitation with history. Yes, Miss Susan Drake completes the symbolism. Ah Clio, if we <u>can</u> bring together the interest of scholars and the public, we'll make an honest woman of you yet!