

# Why Local History is Important

by Randy Jaye & David Churchman

Have you ever read and enjoyed a novel like *Cannery Row* or *Little Women*—books about ordinary people leading ordinary lives in their own little parts of the world without much attention to the grand scale of national or international events? There also are novels such as *Grapes of Wrath* that tell of the impact of national events on life in the towns that we actually live in. Both can be compelling and interesting. Local history is both enjoyable and worthwhile reading.

Thomas O’Neill Jr., former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, said with some exaggeration and ambiguity, “all politics is local.” Maybe not all but certainly a lot. Similarly, local history increases our awareness, appreciation and understanding of the sorts of people, things, and events that we know and experience every day.

Local history describes how the major events like wars and economic depressions affected individuals like ourselves. It tells us how people got to where their descendants live—why people from Sweden settled in one part of the country and people from Germany settled in another. How new customs evolved such as Thanksgiving and what old ones like religions were kept. Why people in Arizona eat different foods than people in Louisiana or Massachusetts. How immigrants fit in, overcame obstacles, learned English, in a word how they became Americans. Why some towns remained small and others grew into great cities. This is part of what local history is all about.

We learn local history from books, movies, and in many other ways. We research our own ancestors. We ask who our parks, schools and street signs are named after. Local history comes alive when we supplement textbooks by preserving artifacts in local history museums such as the simple hand tools our ancestors used to carve homes out of the wilderness. We list buildings on the National Register of Historic Places, and protect records stored in local archives and societies. These records include newspapers, letters, photographs, drawings, paintings, papers, advertisements, and books that describe businesses, politics, weddings, and funerals. More recently, digital displays present historic facts and events in a more interactive method that appeals to younger people. The digitization of historic documents and photographs and posting them on the internet, facilitates widespread distribution of materials that can be accessed and researched from anywhere in the world.

These various records allow historians and novelists to reconstruct or interpret how past residents lived decades or centuries earlier and tell the stories that shaped the local area’s history. A deeper understanding of past events often leads to a greater appreciation of historical circumstances and a greater respect for past generations and their trail blazing people. This brings the origins of communities to life which can shape the way a person thinks about the present.

The grand scale of history includes the population of entire countries and world events. However, it is important to realize that individuals, families, and local communities have all played a significant role in shaping all historic events. The study of local history provides

valuable knowledge that proves that almost all individuals can play a role in contributing to the continuing story of their community. Knowledge of the past can surely assist in figuring out the present and offer insight for planning for the future.

### **About the Authors**

Randy Jaye is an historian who has successfully researched and nominated four properties that have been added to the National Register of Historic Places. He has authored numerous articles for history journals and two history books of local interest: *Flagler County, Florida: A Centennial History* and *Perseverance: Episodes of Black History from the Rural South*. He earned both a Master's degree and a Bachelor's degree from the California State University. In 2020, he was elected to the Ormond Beach Historical Society's Board of Directors.

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