

Danbury's

U N S U N G

"Bailey's History" is how it's generally known. A close look at the title page, though, reveals its true title — *History of Danbury, Conn., 1684-1896; From Notes and Manuscript Left by James Montgomery Bailey Compiled with Additions by Susan Benedict Hill*. New York: Burr Printing House, 1896. Anyone who tries to use this rambling tome finds it illogical in structure, difficult to use as a reference and riddled with apparent contradictions and inaccuracies. Despite its pitfalls, it has served as Danbury's only definitive history since its publication.

Among its more obvious faults is an index that lists only last names, which makes looking up an individual with a common family name a formidable task. And though there is much entertaining lore about Danbury in the early 19th century, historical perspective on the growth of the city from the mid-19th century on is entirely lacking. The only useful sections in this regard are those devoted to topics like church, bar, medical and similar histories. On the whole, the book is more of a mixture of entertaining nostalgia and self-congratulation than a work that makes sense of the past.

These kinds of faults are not uncommon among local histories of the 19th century (partial exceptions being the town histories authored by Rev. Samuel Orcutt, including New Milford, and Ellen Larned of Windham County), but Danbury's seems even more confusing than most.

The answer to the mystery of this problematic work is hinted at on the title page. James Montgomery Bailey died in 1894, two years before the book was published. At the time he was a figure of world-wide fame, acknowledged as the pioneer of journalistic humor and known universally as "The Danbury News Man". He apparently had begun assembling a manuscript, perhaps to be dotted with the kind of wry commentary for which he had become famous.

It was natural, then, that after his death the committee of the Danbury Relief Society that published the book chose to stress his connection to the project, even to implying authorship. In reality, "Bailey's History" had three major authors.

One was Susan Benedict Hill, descendant of one of the town's founding families and a recent widow. While traveling abroad with her wealthy and successful husband she had become interested in genealogy, and when the Danbury Relief Society chose her to complete the manuscript after Bailey's death, she contributed a great deal of original research on old probate records and deeds.

Bailey apparently left a manuscript, though. The individual histories of the bar, church, etc. were probably submitted as he was assembling it. Most of it, though, was drawn from a series of historical columns that he had begun running in the *Danbury News* in 1879, as the town approached its bicentennial. Bailey gave the series the formidable name "Old Danbury, Being A Series of Rambling Papers, Historical, Biographical and Topographical, Concerning Our Town".

Some of the columns are recognizable as Bailey's work, particularly showing his fascination for items in old newspapers, and leavened with the kind of puns he favored in his own journal.

Most of the "Old Danbury" columns though, particularly the ones packed with the most useful and interesting historical information, bear the byline "A.B.H."

This was Aaron Banks Hull, who was the principal author of the series. He was born in Redding in 1812 and was brought up there. His father had been a soldier in the Revolution, serving as a youth in the militia, and he vividly recalled his experiences during Tryon's raid on Danbury.

In his adulthood A. B. Hull came to Danbury, becoming the freight agent of the Danbury & Norwalk Railroad. It must have been there that he picked up the kind of stories and detailed information that he packed into his columns. Stories about other forms of transportation especially fascinated him, as did the characters connected with them. In 1859 he wrote a collection of stories about the stage driver Hiram Barnes, who was renowned around the western part of the state for his quick wit and withering sarcasm. The article was published in the *New York Mercury*.

In addition, Hull wrote whole columns of recollections of aspects of his youth in Redding, par-

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ticularly if a reader had submitted his own recollections the previous week. Thus there are detailed accounts of school and schoolmasters, the post riders, the anti-abolitionist riots of 1838 and other disturbances.

Hatting also drew Hull's attention and he updated William H. Francis' 1860 History of the Hat Trade in Danbury when it was reprinted in the News as part of the Old Danbury series.

The series continued to run to over 100 installments, well into 1883. It made up most of the Danbury section of Hurd's History of Fairfield County, published in 1882. By this time Hull was becoming an acknowledged local historian. When the Fairfield County Historical Society formed in Bridgeport in 1881, he was elected as its first vice-president.

Only two years later though, on March 12, 1884, he died. Although he had the satisfaction of seeing his work published in the Fairfield County history, 12 years elapsed before a Danbury history was published, and by that time A. B. Hull and his contributions had been forgotten. Even though many charters were reprinted exactly from "Old Danbury" columns which were signed "A. B. H.", nowhere in Bailey's History is there an acknowledgement of Hull or his work.

Even more interesting is information from columns he authored which was completely omitted from the published history. Hull was careful about accuracy; he published corrections in the following week's column if he had misstated a fact, and acknowledged statements he could not substantiate with sufficient authority.

Among the items in A. B. Hull's "Old Danbury" columns which never made it into Danbury's published history are the following, which shed a new light on several dark corners of the past:

— "Tradition informs us that Capt. John Hoyt was the pioneer (of the first eight settlers who founded Danbury in 1684), having started alone on foot through the wilderness, and the first day got as far as Hoyt's Hill, now in Bethel, and that night slept under a rock which still bears the name of Hoyt's Rock. After viewing the land, and being pleased with its appearance, he returned to Norwalk, and his report being satisfactory, the seven other families, with his, soon formed a settlement here."

— "Ives & White were the first wholesale hatters in New York, and had their hats made in Danbury. Their store was in Water Street. Deacon Isaac Ives of this firm (was founder of the well known Ives family in Danbury). Later, Jagger & Haines kept a wholesale hat store in New York, and these two firms were the only ones in the business there for a number of years."

— "In 1812 Jacob Fry and ----- started classes for the instruction of colored boys and girls. The following year the Sunday school was started."

— "Mr. Harrison Flint came from Lowell, Mass. in 1854 and commenced the machine business on Main Street. The next year he built a machine shop near Tweedy & White's hat forming factory, and remained in business there for about ten years. He built the first steam engine ever built in Danbury, also the first complete fur blower, and made the first successful machine for tearing up hat roundings. In 1864 Mr. Flint sold out his interest, and returned to Lowell, and with Gen. B. F. Butler and others, purchased the Wamsutta water power, and was the first that was ever successful in this country in making American bunting for flags. He made a contract with the government for flags, sold out to Gen. Butler, and returned to Danbury . . . he also built a large factory on the power now used by William Merson (Merson's Pond). Mr. Flint, who was at one time one of our most enterprising businessmen, and who did much toward building up our manufacturing interests, has now settled down into a quiet life, and is contented with collecting the town taxes."

None of these statements was ever challenged by readers, and we can assume they are as accurate as anything that appears in the History of Danbury.

A. B. Hull should not be blamed for the loose structure of what appears in Bailey's. He wrote the columns as "rambling papers", and they were meant for entertaining newspaper columns rather than a reference work. He took pains to be accurate, and without his remarkable contribution our knowledge of Danbury's history would be slim and colorless indeed.