THE STATE OF HISTORY
IN THE STATE OF CONNECTICUT

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About ten years ago the history profession began to sense that it was in trouble. Enrollment in history courses and the number of history majors at colleges across the country plummeted in the mid-1960's as members of the now generation rejected the study of the past as a sham and a trap. At the same time history was being shouldered aside in the high schools by the more glamorous social sciences. In December 1968 one of the elder statesmen of the profession brought the crisis to the attention of those attending the convention of the American Historical Association in New York City. Professor Charles Sellers of the University of California at Berkeley predicted that history would soon disappear from the curriculum of the public schools. He asked his colleagues two alarming questions: "Is history on the way out of the schools, and do historians care?"

Historians did care. The History Education Project was created by the American Historical Association to bring high school and college teachers into productive contact. Summer institutes for high school instructors, funded by the federal government, sprouted everywhere. In the summer of 1969, 34 of these courses were conducted at colleges in 20 states. A steadily increasing number of sessions at professional meetings were devoted to classroom teaching. Momentum for a first-rate journal of history teaching grew until The History Teacher was upgraded into such a publication in 1973. Individual teachers at all levels experimented with courses that emphasized creative inquiry rather than memorization; the structure of the discipline not the narrative; and skills instead of facts. Publishers churned out a stream of readers, source books, films, and tapes.

Still unclear is the effectiveness of this crash program. Have a significant number of historians altered their teaching method, or has experimentation been confined to a concerned few? Do students now judge history more favorably? Is history

alive and well, or still in eclipse? To find the answer to these questions the Organization of American Historians in 1974 appointed an ad hoc Committee on the Status of Teaching in the Schools. Made up of one member from each state, the Committee was charged with gathering data on a state-by-state basis that would be incorporated into a report made by Executive Secretary Richard S. Kirkendall to the annual meeting of the OAH in Boston in April, 1975.

Representing Connecticut on this fact finding Committee I attempted to answer the six questions suggested by the OAH. Several questions concerned the formal requirements for teaching history in the public schools in Connecticut as spelled out by the State Department of Education. Four questions were directed to the place of history in the curriculum of the public schools. Is it an independent subject given heavy emphasis? Is it a part of the social studies? Is it a neglected subject? Has the position of history changed recently? The final question dealt with the present enrollment in history courses in the colleges and universities in Connecticut compared with enrollments five or ten years ago. This article is based on the report I submitted to the Organization of American Historians in December, 1974.

The report was far from a scientific analysis. In part it was based on personal observations made over the past five years in my capacity as college supervisor of secondary school history student teaching. As department chairman I have had many opportunities to discuss trends in history education with Wesconn graduate students in history who are active teachers in the schools. An attempt to obtain less subjective information was made in the fall of 1974 when a short questionnaire was sent to history departments at the 40 institutions of higher education in Connecticut, and to Social Studies departments in approximately 100 Middle and Secondary schools located within a 50 mile radius of Danbury. The response to this mailing was not overwhelming, and time did not permit a follow-up reminder. Fourteen colleges, universities, and junior colleges, and 22 junior and senior high schools replied. Fortunately two incidents add to the value of this meagre sample. A balanced number of schools at all levels, and, in the case of pre-junior college

institutions, representing communities of varied size, economic base, location, and ethno-cultural composition, cooperated. Those chairmen who took time to answer the questions did so at great length, often supporting their conclusions with statistical evidence.

In Connecticut, what is taught in town schools is largely determined by the local Board of Education. In the area of history state law requires only that some type of instruction in United States history be provided in all elementary and secondary schools. With few qualifications, the timing and form of this instruction is a town decision. In 1949 the state legislature mandated that the United States history courses give special attention to government, particularly the rights and duties of citizenship. In 1967 the General Assembly directed that all books used in all Social Studies courses "present the achievements and accomplishments of individuals and groups from all ethnic and racial backgrounds."

Operating within these sketchy guidelines school systems in Connecticut have such disparate courses of study that generalizations about the position of history are risky. However the following points represent some trends evident in the responses to the questionnaire, butressed by my own experience:

1. No Connecticut schools have a separate History Department. History as a subject is taught as one of the offerings of the Social Studies Department.
2. Every school offers courses distinctly labeled "history." These courses normally constitute less than half the total number of social studies courses offered, and enroll about half of the students registered in all social studies courses.
3. The only history course universally required in the schools is United States history taught usually at the 8th and 11th grade levels. Over the past five years the tendency in most schools has been to eliminate requirements. European history, once a foundation course, is now rarely required.

4. A larger number and a wider variety of history courses are offered as electives than in an earlier period. Most courses are still one semester in length, although shorter "mini-courses" of six or eight weeks duration are gaining popularity. Schools responding to the questionnaire mentioned offering an assortment of electives which included the history of Asia, Latin America, Russia, Africa, the Middle East, Germany, England, Blacks, and the Supreme Court. Elective offerings are so numerous that many high schools have begun to publish catalogs with course descriptions resembling college catalogs.

5. A steadily increasing number of schools are substituting American Studies for the traditional American History course. In most cases this innovation represents a union of history and literature with teachers from both disciplines working in a team arrangement. In a few instances a more comprehensive interdisciplinary approach is utilized integrating the physical sciences as well as the humanities and social sciences. One of the most creative school systems in Connecticut offers a 7th grade American Studies course that features a unit on the relationship between the city and the suburbs entitled "Man and Megalopolis." The present indecision in this school about this course reveals the fragility of interdisciplinary effort. The members of the Social Studies department are currently locked in a debate about whether to attempt a second multi-disciplinary unit on "Man and the Future", or to add another chronological segment to the units on the colonial, revolutionary and constitutional eras which make up the traditional component of the American Studies course.

6. While the number of history courses has increased in the last decade the number of social science courses in the school curriculums has

multiplied faster. One chairman wrote that when he began teaching in a high school on the suburban fringe of Bridgeport in 1966 three of the five courses taught by the Social Studies department were history courses. Currently only four of the twelve courses offered in this school were specifically history courses. He observed that 30% of the Senior class in 1974 are enrolled in social science electives--psychology and anthropology are the most popular--while only 15% are studying history. In a large urban high school eight of the sixteen social studies courses are in history. During the past semester the total enrollment in psychology, sociology, and anthropology electives equaled the 500 students taking the mandatory United States history course.

7. There is a growing emphasis in the history classrooms in Connecticut schools on the teaching of concepts and skills. This is a thrust encouraged by the professional administrators and curriculum developers and compliments the current infatuation with "accountability." In candor it must be said that many, if not most, school classrooms are still conducted in the traditional narrative lecture method.

Is history dying? A few teachers contacted are very gloomy about prospects for the discipline. A Junior High School chairman concluded his questionnaire with the lament "the teaching of History has taken a beating in our school and system in the last several years." More indignantly, a department head in Norwalk compained that "history, as a discipline, has been dying, its place usurped by the 'new' social studies." But the vast majority do not accept this estimate. Most would agree with the high school chairman in Ridgefield who insisted that history "still maintains its central place in our social studies curriculum." They point to the expanding number of students who are voluntarily choosing to take history courses to support their optimism. One school official noted that this year 200 students elected to take a course in Modern European history, twice the number who made

that choice two years ago. Another school boasted that approximately one-third of the Sophomore class had opted for courses in Ancient, Medieval and Modern European history in the current semester. Those confident that history has vitality also argue that high school courses in the social sciences and the popular regional studies courses are taught by people trained in history who utilize the historical method and rely on illustrations from history.

The status of history in Connecticut colleges is clouded by the serious gaps in my data. The University of Connecticut supplied enrollment figures for its main campus at Storrs but not for the five two-year branches. All four state colleges made data available although two could not locate registration figures going back ten years. The largest private institution in the state, Yale University, did not respond, but three other prestigious private colleges did. Only a sprinkling of Junior or Community colleges were able to contribute information.

From this limited base what can be concluded? The pattern at the state supported colleges is similar; a steady decline in history enrollments from the peak of 1969 to 1971. In 1969-70 history enrollments at the University of Connecticut totaled 4283, up from the figure of 3717 in 1963-64 but down from the 5407 in 1969-70. At Southern Connecticut State 1827 students registered for history courses in 1963-64. By 1970-71 the number had risen to 5713, before sagging to 5317 in the most recent academic year. The drop was even more severe at Central Connecticut State. Enrollments of 5768 in 1965-66 which had risen to 8318 in 1969-70, shrunk to 4478 in 1973-74. Five years ago Western Connecticut State serviced 1425 students in 58 history course sections. Last year 1235 history students were accomodated in 45 sections. Five years ago 8.5% of the total course enrollments at Eastern Connecticut State were in history courses. By 1973-74 the percentage had fallen to 5.9%.

Several factors must be mentioned to place this general decline in perspective. Most of the State institutions abolished or lessened general education requirements during the past five years, a development which made such staples as "Western Civ-

ilization" no longer a mandatory undergraduate hurdle. During this same time overall college growth slowed. State imposed budget cuts eliminated some history faculty members with a consequent lessening of variety in course offerings and therefore student drawing power.

A different situation is present in the private institutions. History enrollment in private colleges in Connecticut showed slow but consistent growth even over the past five years. Wesleyan University enjoyed a 27% increase in the number of students selecting history courses in the spring term of 1974. When Trinity College in Hartford freed the students of the need to take the European History survey 1969 an immediate 25% drop in the number of history enrollments occurred. Since then history registration has steadily climbed back to the 1969 level. At Connecticut College in New London, where history is no longer needed for graduation history enrollments are in the view of the department chairman "very favorable", up slightly from five years ago.

It is hazardous to build elaborate conclusions on such a flimsy foundation as this report. However it appears that history is enjoying a modest rebirth of interest in both high schools and colleges. How much of this renaissance should be credited to innovate teaching and attractive courses, and how much to the current movement back to educational basics is uncertain. Clearly, the challenge presented by Professor Sellers in 1968 still cannot be dismissed. Teaching historians at all levels must continue to "care" about making the data of the past speak intelligibly to the students of today.