

Rescued from Oblivion: Historical Cultures in the Early United States

By Alea Henle. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020.

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When choosing a book to read, my first questions are “Is the title interesting?” and “Does it make me want to look closer?” *Rescued from Oblivion* was a resounding “yes” on both counts. As an avid reader who is always looking for something new to learn, this book did not disappoint.

Whether your background is in libraries, archives, or museums, it is easy to commiserate with the struggles early historical societies (1791–1850) faced. Finding the balance between collecting everything of interest or not enough material plagued early historical societies much like it can today. This was particularly true in the early days of an institution when an item’s intrinsic value depended not only on content but also on the accepting society’s or librarian’s opinion of what was important enough to keep. Historical society librarians and officers selected and culled donated items based on the materials’ potential usefulness for writing about history in the future.

Alea Henle’s passion for research makes her an ideal person to tackle the topic of historical collecting. Henle is an associate librarian and head of the Access and Borrow department at Miami University Libraries. She received a master’s in library science from Simmons College and a PhD in history from the University of Connecticut. Henle states that her “research interests center on how decisions [made] in libraries, archives, research centers, and commercial database providers increasingly shape the resources available—making materials paradoxically both easier and more difficult to locate.”¹ In *Rescued from Oblivion*, Henle “uses close examination of historical societies to explore historical cultures and consciousness in the early United States” (p. 2). She draws on accounts that emphasize how historical society decision-makers over two hundred years ago faced similar paradigms as do current professionals regarding collection policies, preservation of textual and three-dimensional artifacts, and reconciliation of scholarly and popular approaches to understanding history.

The book begins in the late eighteenth century citing challenges the new United States faced in defining the line between British and American history. Early societies attempted to focus on the national level, but many failed because they tried to cover a large geographic area and an unsustainable scope. Regional or city-specific groups fared better because they focused on a local or smaller area, making

it easier to appeal to individuals and groups for support; some of these groups continue to exist today. Throughout the first half of the book, Henle illustrates early societies' struggles in defining what to collect, though the vast majority preferred facts (information, chronicles of events) and primary sources (newspapers, government documents, diaries, letters, etc.), specifically government records, public documents, and what would now be considered city directories (whether printed or as lists created and submitted to the societies by citizens). Many historical societies focused their missions on "gathering historical information for use in the writing of history" (p. 102) and "valued documents as much or more based on content than circumstances of creation, although they gathered documents as sources of information rather than as artifacts in and of themselves" (p. 103). Contemporary archival collections continue to emphasize the importance of a document's information over the physicality of presentation because, as history has taught us, paper can be destroyed in a variety of ways.

The second half of the book explores the impact of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century historical societies' collecting practices on women and other marginalized communities, particularly the propensity to view all history through a European-American upper-class lens due to most officers and members of the organizations being part of that social class. When historical societies desired items from marginalized communities, officers and collection keepers—not donors—defined the items' historical importance. Henle discusses two case studies in which donations highlighted how "women of wealth and station . . . ensured [the] acceptance of items documenting women's lives and labors" in the context of their connections to important men of station (p. 6). One example is a pair of shoes donated to the Connecticut Historical Society and "described as having belonged to Mary Young Ledyard, mother of Revolutionary War hero Colonel William Ledyard and grandmother of the noted traveler John Ledyard" (p. 144). While the shoes were owned by Mary Young Ledyard, their importance at the time of donation hinged on the connection with Colonel Ledyard and tangentially the shoemaker, Jonathan Hose and Son, rather than on anything Ledyard did herself. In another example, when the Connecticut Historical Society sought to collect items "that would show the Costume and throw light on the early history of the Colony" (p. 170), Hannah Whittelsey donated items owned by her grandmother and great-aunt and provided as much information about the items as possible, including their creators (her father and brother). However, the historical society ledgers recorded the donation to emphasize the men (creators) over the women (users) and referenced Whittelsey's husband as the donor as if she were incapable of making the donation herself. Henle does not shy away from the harsh realities of fighting for inclusive narratives, something cultural heritage professionals still struggle with today.

Henle provides some examples in the epilogue of historical societies established to focus on religious denominations and groups including "women, African

Americans, and Native Americans [who] worked to preserve materials documenting their histories and affirm their importance” (p. 190), including the Presbyterian Historical Society (1852) and the Afro-American Historical Society (1897), both of which still exist today. To some extent, these organizations have been able to narrow the gaps in their history because they were founded in the mid- to late nineteenth century, allowing them to learn from earlier organizations’ choices. Henle states that “societies located in states with sizable non-Anglo ethnic populations engaged to various degrees in documenting more diverse pasts [even though] English-language materials and descendants predominated” (p. 176). Many of these efforts came in the form of documenting French, Spanish, or Dutch histories rather than the more contentious histories of slavery or Native American rights and land claims. However, Henle describes societies’ attempts to document slavery through a chronological history of print materials that covered slavery from a distance of years. In doing so, societies perpetuated a “literal separation of present slavery and abolition activities from historical pursuits” by not collecting items related to slavery, accepting only a few artifacts related to those enslaved, or soliciting “works on colonization or abolition . . . within the context of gathering the publications of religious or charitable organizations” rather than actively collecting contemporary items (p. 177). Henle also notes how historical societies invested more time “documenting the pasts of Native American peoples than those of African descent to solidify white control of the land versus Native American rights and historic presence” (p. 180). Documentation came in the form of actively gathering information and artifacts from the past, essentially denying centuries of Native American presence in North America and overlooking the presence of Native Americans in contemporary society. Henle’s inclusion of these collecting strategies highlights the struggle that archives, museums, and historical societies may face today when attempting to fill gaps in information and collections in a belated effort to document the history of previously overlooked groups, including the working class, women, and minorities.

Rescued from Oblivion not only shares the history of historical societies, it also imparts the uniqueness of cultural heritage organizations. Professional archival collection standards were nonexistent when US historical societies began to emerge, yet they were born out of and refined by a group of individuals who realized the significance of defining preservation and disseminating the information contained within historical documents. An even smaller group of historical society officers, librarians, and businessmen understood the importance of specialized buildings to accommodate and preserve the archival materials being collected. While they were mostly unsuccessful in funding specialized construction, collection losses from fires, inadequate housing in mixed-use buildings, and rapid demolition and construction during the Industrial Revolution contributed to future officers and donors heeding their warnings by designing buildings and systems specifically for cultural heritage collections.

Anyone with an interest in cultural or national heritage will find *Rescued from Oblivion* worthwhile. That said, Henle missed opportunities to connect her analysis to archives. Although the narrative is filled with in-depth research (emphasized with over sixty footnotes per chapter), the book lacks specific information on how archival standards were developed; Henle merely describes the general realization that standards were needed. If she had explored this topic in greater depth, the book would be more useful for archival and information science academics. A good portion of the book also discusses how historical societies shared their collections with their membership and each other, mostly through publications. However, Henle does not reference other scholarship that touches on the practice of preservation through publication and glosses over the implication of this preservation method to the archival profession today. Though missing these points, the book is still worthwhile as a reference about how early historical societies and archives were established. While it is interesting to learn what different historical societies published and believed was important, the book lends itself more to leisure reading by academics, historians, cultural heritage professionals, and history enthusiasts than as a reference text for disseminating applicable and executable skills.

Henle writes, “a broader range of institutional missions flourished than existing scholarship has considered, demonstrating that citizens founded historical societies to ensure different identities and histories were remembered” (p. 48). This statement, though seemingly contradictory to what has become part of the standard mission of collecting organizations—gathering information for the writing of history—made me reflect on today’s cultural heritage institutions and the history we are creating now. How long will it take for marginalized groups to have their version of the National Museum of the American Indian or the Hispanic Society Museum and Library? What would happen to regional identity and history if state lines were redrawn? These “back burner” questions consistently reappeared as I was eagerly reading. Although *Rescued from Oblivion* does not provide all the answers, it will hopefully inspire archives professionals to become more cognizant of gaps in current collecting practices.

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¹ Alea Henle, “About,” <https://aleahenle.com/about>.