

History: The Great Detective Pursuit

[Note: This essay was written for the author's children and grandchildren. The general perspective, however, may be helpful to any reader.]

History is our understanding and representation of the past. That is not the definition you'll get from a school book and probably not what you'll hear from an elementary or middle-school history teacher. Unfortunately it's not what you are likely to hear from an upper-school teacher these days either, which is why so many people go on to college thinking that history is something that happened, that there's only one version of what happened and it's the one in the book (or it's what the teacher said).

History is a marvelous puzzle. It's intriguing. It's fascinating. It's addictive in a very healthy way. Scholars have been known to disappear inside it, intellectually speaking, that is, and never come out. For those who have gotten far enough in studying history, it's a compelling search for what we can learn through hard evidence and for explanations of what we can only surmise by fragments of information. Much information was never written down. Much that was written down has been destroyed through decay or deliberate action. Much of what was written down was filtered, in later versions, through the opinions and beliefs of the redactors. As we read it today, the text may have been recast by someone to give a totally different meaning than that which the original author intended. It may be because the redactor only knew part of the story. We don't know it all and we never will, but searching for pieces of the puzzle is exciting business.

Until the 1970s (and much later for some older historians quite set in their ways), much of the history that was written, and especially the history that was placed in school books followed the "great men" tradition. The study and writing of history as we know it arose in the universities of Germany in the 19th century and quickly found its place in the other great universities on England, France, Italy, and other countries. That history tended to be written as the history of great people from the point of view of the country in which the history was written. It featured treaties, wars and the alliances of leaders either through

agreements or through marriage. And indeed what was written was very much the history of (in the opinion of those historians) “great men.” When women were mentioned it’s because they were royal and were necessary to royal marriage alliances or were leaders like Joan of Arc, who was such a thorn in the side of male leaders that she couldn’t be ignored by historians and have history make sense. We are quick to criticize this narrow approach today, but it was born out of a society in which men were the scholars and guided governments. Women were thought to be too delicate for tasks of governance or scholarship. I’ll leave you to make your own comments on this, but you already know that contemporary ideas are very different. From our own context it seems very odd indeed, but one of the very important things to consider in studying history is how people thought at the time, and that may be *very* different from what we think now.

We won’t get into all aspects of history here, because that would take a book all by itself. Instead we’ll talk about the field of Family History, about the history of people like you and me and how they lived and loved and passed their ideas on along with their genetic material. For a long time this kind of history was known as Genealogy (it’s pronounced “jenn-ealogy,” not “jean-ealogy”). In fact, most professional family historians are still known as “genealogists”. Many have the same kinds of education as history professors in universities and have achieved the Doctor of Philosophy degree (PhD). Other family historians have an MA or MS (Master of Arts or Master of Science), a graduate degree that is a prelude to the PhD and which introduces the student to intensive critical thinking for evaluating evidence. In addition, professional genealogists are certified by one or another board. They do this so that people who hire them to solve family history puzzles can have some kind of assurance that the genealogist or family historian is qualified to do the work.

But is history only for professionals? Not at all. Lots of people study history of one kind or another because it fascinates them, because they want to be able to piece together as best they can what happened at a particular place and time or what happened to a specific person. It’s very much like the kind of work detectives do. Police detectives deal with what probably happened that caused a crime to be committed so that a court can decide guilt or innocence. Private detectives have a much broader range of activities, from finding lost persons to finding out a person’s background or establishing rights to inheritances and much more. They deal in the present and in the past. The historian deals in the past to a large extent.

Today’s historians are free from the constraints of the “great-men” and “diplomatic-history” schools of thought. They study public records, family records, private accounts of events, archaeological evidence, medical evidence — all kinds of things — to come to a conclusion about a particular event or circumstance. They draw on the tools of anthropologists, archaeologists, sociologists

and other experts. In fact, the fields now overlap somewhat. There are historical anthropologists and anthropological historians, there are social anthropologists and social historians. There are historians of law and medicine. And there are still some historians who specialize in geographical things like place names and old handwriting. (These latter are called *paleographers*.) All of them are passionate about a detective pursuit that for them is very alive and exciting. Among them are the family historians — the genealogists — professional and amateur (and there are some very good amateurs). In recent years, especially with the availability of genealogical information on World Wide Web, supported by good reference work, the study of families has become a passion for many people.

There are lots of different motives for pursuing family history. For some people, as we have seen above, it's a professional pursuit. For many of the rest of us, it's a desire to examine our roots, our common ties with parents and grandparents and their parents and grandparents and so on. It's a desire to know what motivated them to move from one country to another, to change from one religion to another, to cross a dangerous ocean in a small sailing ship or to strike out into the wilderness. It's an untidy puzzle; it's a constantly unfolding tale as we discover each new piece of evidence. And it's about people like you and me.

In the rest of this essay I'll talk about what's really involved in doing good family history and historical research in general, because this research is more complicated and demanding than reading books or looking at files on World Wide Web. We'll talk about how you go about finding out about a person. And then we'll talk about some of the fascinating people who are a part of us, our "ancestors" — way back in history.

Why Look at Our Ancestors?

Why do we care about ancestors? Why do we care about history at all? After all, we live in the present and the future is what becomes the present next. History doesn't repeat itself, although people are always saying it does. They say this because often people in the past behaved in a particular way that *resembles* something that is going on in the present. Understanding the past helps us to understand who we are and who our parents and grandparents are and (to use the vernacular) "what makes them tick." Yes, there are other things that "make them tick," such as a particular good or bad experience or a particular balance of chemicals in their bodies, but lots of things we do are done because of something we've learned. It may not even be conscious. Some of that is passed down or "inherited" as an idea or concept from someone else, often someone in the previous generation. That person can be a teacher or another older person, but quite often it's one of your parents. How did they come to think a particular way or

hold a particular belief? Along with determining just who they were, we can find out a lot about people by finding out the context of what they thought in the time they were thinking it and how they transmitted that to their children. On a very personal scale, this is the history of ideas, which is a fascinating subject to study.

On a larger scale, we can study all we can find out about a particular period of history to use as a model for studying the present. That's pretty complicated. Historians use these larger-scale examples of the past as ways to think differently about both the past and the present. For example, which people could read (and what was available to them to read) and how they understood lots of things — even how they understood time — can help us understand our own world and theirs.

Uses Of "The Past"

Some people use the past to oppress other people. They use positions of power to gain and retain control over others. Governments do this sometimes and so, to some extent, do religions. So do races and sexes, as in the white supremacist movement or male-supremacists. They use the precedents of history — evidence that a certain status has existed or was meant to exist — to justify a position.

Other people use the past to justify a personal superiority over others. In this way they try to prove that they are better than other people. Any number of organizations exist in which some members are motivated by an opportunity to prove that they are better than someone else. They publish directories of persons in their groups so that each knows who the other "superior" persons are with whom they can feel at ease. They include organizations of early settlers of some location ("we got here first"), of nobility ("we ruled the country"), of a particular university (the intellectual elite), or the socially elite (persons listed in the Social Register). They include descendants of persons who settled in the American Colonies (or some other colonies) in a particular century or people whose ancestors fought in the American Revolution, or persons who were a part of the German nobility as listed in the *Almanach de Gotha*, and so on. Some people do this to establish a particular social order or to satisfy their insecurities about living in the world in general. But not all of them do that. Some members of all of these groups (except maybe the Social Register) are interested purely in learning more about a particular group of people or a particular community or series of events.

It's wonderful to be curious about the past, but you as a person must do your part to make your world a better place and to leave it a better place for your children. And you must not blame any failings of your own on your ancestors. Take responsibility for yourself. If learning about the past gives you perspective to do this, all the better. If you use your tie to some ancestor (or if you use wealth,

for example) to justify your existence, you are abusing history and denigrating the real you. Take the information you learn to help you build your ideas for today, because then you will be drawing on the best uses of yesterday. Now on to learning about ways we can study the past.

What Was Life Like?

For some readers, this description may seem a little elementary. Those of us who are historians, sociologists, political scientists or anthropologists have studied how living conditions affect occupations, ideas, kinship, social structures, age of marriage, and choice of a partner. For others, whose exposure to Western Civilization consisted of a semester or quarter of general instruction dealing mostly with names and dates, or for young persons who haven't studied these things yet, some of the material that follows may provide insight into how our ancestors lived.

We live in a marvelous world, full of technology that we take for granted. Much of it was developed in the latter half of the 20th century. Some came in the previous 50 years, and other things came in the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. Changes were gradual, but they had great effect on how we live and what we do and how we think. The computer was not available for most people until the 1980s. Here are a few examples: Yes there were big computers that were installed for people to do research or to do accounting in the 1940s through the early 1970s, but the personal computer appeared only in the late 1970s and it was a primitive critter compared to the Macs and PCs we take for granted in our homes now. Television was first available in the late 1940s and only generally available in the early 1950s. Color television was not generally available until the 1960s. Radio appeared in the early 1920s. The telephone arrived in the late 1800s (and in many places much later). The Crimean War in the middle of the 19th century was first war reported to the world by telegraph. Before that it could take a long time for information to travel from one place to another. Think about depending on handwritten letters for communication and depending on a postal service that traveled by horse or boat. And think about not having a postal service at all! Or on how people amused themselves! (They talked and told stories, played musical instruments themselves and read, for example.)

We take for granted many of the hums of mechanical devices or the access to information that is available by flicking a switch or keying in a few words. Electricity that powers our television sets and stereo receivers and computers became available to some people only in the 20th century. The typewriter keyboard was a 19th-century invention. Gas fuel for furnaces or stoves or water heaters became available in the 19th century. Before that water was heated by wood or coal. Heat for houses came from furnaces in basements — great behemoths that burned coal

or wood. And before that there were fireplaces — and before fireplaces in walls and corners, fires were built in the middle of rooms with stone, brick, or earth floors. Smoke escaped through a hole in the roof.

The airplane first flew in the early 20th century. Commercial aviation began in the 1930s, but it wasn't available to a great many people until the late 1940s. And cars came into existence in the late 19th century. Even railroads, which still transport lots of materials we use, and which once transported a lot of people, were mostly built in the 19th century.

In our families, recorded ancestors go back a long way in some cases. Everybody's ancestors go back a long way, of course, but we have records of a lot of ours and that makes it possible for us to know where they lived and when and how their lives differed from ours. Life before electricity, before clocks (when the times of day were marked by church bells that rang out the hours for various services) was quite different. Going from one place to another took a long time when done by horse or on foot or in a sailing boat. People thought about time differently, and they thought about the world around them differently. Concepts of property ownership and the relationships of people were different. Occupations were different. Many concepts were imposed by tradition, religion, or crown. There weren't always countries with governments and representation as we know them. Instead there were rulers to whom one owed allegiance in return for protection. And in some places there were limited republics, where only an elite group made decisions for the rest of society.

Today we have remarkable opportunities to do what we want, develop our lives the way we wish and to live where we want. That was not always possible either because of strictly separated classes of people — aristocracy, clergy, and "the rest" (which had its own status levels) or because it was difficult to travel from one place to another. Discussing any of these things in a short essay is impossible. They are not only the subjects of books; they are the subjects of whole fields of study. Let's just consider two areas: growing food and getting from place to place.

Food was grown on fairly small farms by today's standards. There were no large business growing and transporting food from place to place. In fact, transporting food over really long distances was impossible unless it was pickled or dried. The beef industry (and the consumption of beef) only developed in the 19th century, after the railroads made it possible to transport steers from the range where they grew to the stockyards and then on to the cities. Before that the major meat consumed in the United States was pork. Frozen food appeared after World War II, in 1946 or so. Canning was developed in the 19th century. Before that people ate fresh food or food that could be stored in cool places safely or preserved in some fashion. Wagons drawn by horses or people on foot took food

to cities. Farmer's markets and food purveyors existed in the towns. People who actually lived on farms were almost entirely self-sufficient. What they could not get could usually be bartered for extra produce from the farm. Many a doctor's bill in rural America was paid in potatoes or onions. Animal manure and compost were used for fertilizers. Chemical fertilizers were unknown.

People preserved all kinds of foods: vegetables, fruits, meats, poultry, eggs. They soaked them in brine, they pickled and spiced them. They lavished the foods they cooked with powdered dry chiles and spices to preserve them or to cover the taste of something that had been around a little too long. Some of our French ancestors rubbed pieces of pork, goose, or duck with salt and herbs, let them sit overnight in a cool place, then submerged them in fat and cooked them very slowly. After that the pieces were stored in sealed jars, surrounded by the fat. That method of preservation, *confit*, is still used in Southwest France. Meats were salted or soaked in salt and water and then smoked and aged. People made wonderful jams and jellies and they distilled juices of fruits to make brandies or fermented them to make wines. Honey was fermented to make a drink called mead. People in the countryside were very self-sufficient. And a great many of our ancestors came from the countryside or lived in small towns where they had easy access to the produce of farms. People even grew sheep for wool and flax to make linen. They spun their own yarns and wove their own cloth.

As you might imagine, all this took considerable time. Just sustaining life and clothing people took a lot of time. Washing clothes took all day because there weren't even primitive washing machines. Everything had to be ironed. Irons were heated in the fireplace or later on stoves. (The wood-burning kitchen stove is a 19th-century invention.) Ironing took a long time because everything that was washed had to be ironed, by necessity. That included sheets and pillow cases for beds, too. As you can see, there was little room for leisure activity unless one was rich enough to have servants.

On land, transportation of food or other materials was by horse-drawn wagon. Transportation of people was by wagon, on horseback, by horse-drawn carriage in a variety of forms, earlier by some conveyance carried by servants (the sedan chair), or on foot. Roads were made of dirt, frequently rutted from the passage of many wagons. There were times of the year when, because of rain or snow or ice, roads were impassable. One could usually not travel more than 20 miles a day by wagon in good weather. It was a little faster on horseback. Think of how long it would take you to get anywhere at that rate! Roads were very nearly of the same kind for many hundreds of years. Many early roads in Europe were built for the Roman army. They developed great ruts, which determined the distance apart wheels could be on wagons and carts. Once roads existed for vehicles of a specific wheelbase, it made sense to make other carts, wagons,

carriages, and coaches to fit them. After all, if the roads were made of dirt no matter how well they were maintained the ruts would come back. When the first railroads were built they took the same gauge for the tracks that was used for carriages' or carts' wheels on the roads.

Then there were places where there weren't any roads. The northeastern end of Lake Ontario in New York State, where many of my ancestors settled, was settled by waterway. Either people came by sailing ship to Sackett's Harbor or Cape Vincent or by travelling up frozen creek beds in the winter time, coming from the Mohawk Valley around Herkimer. Settlement began before the end of the 18th century, but it wasn't until 1825 or so that roads connected some of the towns.

People didn't move long distances very often to take new jobs. Often a person did the same thing for a lifetime and new job, if one occurred, generally happened in one's own community. People lived in the same community as their parents did — and their grandparents, their aunts and uncles and their cousins. They married other people from their own communities, persons who were well-known to their families. The respected anthropologist, Robert Netting, did ground-breaking research on marriage patterns in early Swiss Villages. The results were fascinating and can be applied to towns elsewhere. They showed a preference for marriage partners from one's own village first and after that the next closest village. Partly this is a preference for the familiar and, along with a preference for the familiar, comes a distaste for the unfamiliar. It is from "thought roots" like these that come later prejudices against people from other towns or countries or religions or skin colors or who speak different languages. We'll talk more about suitable marriage partners later. Sometimes it was necessary to go further afield because everyone in a village was too closely related to everyone else and the Church forbade marriages within a certain degree of relationship. In a very primitive sense it was known quite early that people too closely related might produce children with mental or physical defects. Among landowners, the aristocracy, and royalty, marriages were often arranged to increase land holdings or power. People had little say about whom they married. This was quite different from just falling in love and deciding to get married. And often a partner was needed to make a household function, so a suitable spouse was chosen for that purpose rather than for love. In these cases, love, if it came, came later and usually gradually

People didn't live very long either. Diseases, wars, and disasters claimed them early. Sanitation was primitive and not well understood. Children caught many diseases for which there are now vaccinations. Medical care was primitive. Mothers and babies died in childbirth because blood poisoning was a common problem. I lost a wonderful grandmother that way.

Fortunately for us, in the 1950s and 1960s a group of French historians, who published in a journal called *Annales*, and who still publish there, were so influential that they spurred the study of regular folk, of women and children and people who labored on farms or in the weavers shops of Lyon and other places and made it an acceptable area of academic study. They looked at food and rituals and festivals and everyday life. They have names like Fernand Braudel, Marc Bloch, Georges Duby and Emanuel le Roy Ladurie. They made huge contributions to our knowledge of how people lived at every level of life. And because they were influential they were followed by other historians elsewhere. Later, in the United States, historians like Robert Darnton at Princeton did similar work.

Since you can find excellent books that will tell you much about this, I will leave you to your own searching.

About Our Families

I hinted previously that we are fortunate because a lot of our family information is written down. In this section, I'll give you a key to where I found some of that information and where you, too might read about it, but first a little about us.

Both the Ralph Edward Griswold and Madge Elaine Turner Griswold are primarily descended from the earliest English settlers of New England. Some of the ancestors of both of them arrived on the Mayflower's first voyage to Plymouth and were present for the first Thanksgiving. Others were colonial governors in Massachusetts, Connecticut or Virginia. And others were farmers, lawyers, doctors, ministers, tanners, carpenters, and so on.

Both families have deep roots in Connecticut. The Griswolds were among the first settlers at Hartford and Windsor. Some of them served in the Kings Court. The Sperrys, Madge's maternal grandfather's family, were among the first settlers of New Haven.

Other ancestors settled in Stonington, Connecticut or Westerly, Rhode Island. Some were among the first Dutch settlers in New Netherland, the Dutch colony that later became New York. They lived on the island of Manhattan and the Hudson Valley. Later they were among the first German and English settlers in the Mohawk Valley of New York.

Of some parts of the family we knew somewhat less and in some cases we know almost nothing at all until recently. Some people lived in remote areas where records were not well kept. Some disappeared (some apparently intention-

ally). When you start doing family history, expect the unexpected — and it may not always be a pleasant surprise.

We know quite a lot about the Griswolds and Madge's relatives, the Eatons and the Herkimers, because each of us inherited a handwritten genealogy done by a member of our family in the first decades of the 20th century. Unfortunately, the authors did not give their sources, so to do a first-class job we must provide verification. Working at the time they did, they probably used published genealogies for much of their work. Both Madge and Ralph knew some of the histories of their families because the information was transmitted orally to them when they were children. It was only in 1998, with the new availability of World Wide Web for research, nifty new software for the Macintosh (Reunion), and enough time to pursue the search for additional family members that our research began in earnest.

Farther back, in England, France, Scotland, and Ireland both Madge and Ralph have various direct ties through the same people to the aristocracy and nobility of Merovingian, Carolingian, Capetian, and Angevin France, Normandy, Brittany, Burgundy, and Aquitaine. They are both descended from Charlemagne and the early French kings, the English kings from Wessex and All England down through the early Plantagenets (and in Madge's case from King Edward IV), from the Scottish kings, and the Irish high kings, especially of Dalriada. All of this and \$1.00 will get you a cup of coffee at your favorite local diner. Your true worth rests in *yourself*. But this knowledge provides perspective.

Many family historians now view a larger picture in family history than just direct bloodlines, those lines that represent actual genetic transmission and that are necessary to prove the right to inheritances or the right to rule. First of all we can learn a lot about those who lived around our ancestors. Some of these people were aunts and uncles and cousins or grandparents or stepparents. Some were more distantly related. Some were not related at all but had a large influence on the family for one reason or other.

Among the Griswold and Turner families there are a number of common ties: Nicholas Stephens, Edward Griswold "the emigrant", Nathaniel Foote and Elizabeth Deming, Richard Lyman and Sarah Osborne, and Stephen III Tracy and Tryphosa Lee. There are probably others of whom we are not yet aware and there are many more common ancestors farther back.

It's fun to learn about these folks. Our grandmothers and great-grandmothers used to memorize this information and recite it for their children and grandchildren. You can memorize information about them, too, if you want, but there are now computer programs to help you. We have all the known information that we have found so far on our families in a data base. For now, it is sufficient

(and humorous) to say that Ralph and Madge Griswold and Bill Griswold, Rebecca Griswold Reid and Kate and Emily Reid are probably their own cousins several times over, not close enough to be in any genetic danger but close enough to realize that we have a common heritage that explains us and gives us a remarkable common bond.

Means, Motive, and Opportunity

Why do people do what they do with their lives? In contemporary life we have many choices about what we shall do, where we shall go, whom we shall marry and how many children we shall have. People move from place to place easily. They can choose their life's work from a wide variety of pursuits. Education is open to everyone who is qualified and can afford it and to the gifted who cannot afford it. What makes a person take advantage of those choices or not often depends on the attitudes of one's parents, although sometimes it depends on the grim determination of a stubborn soul.

Our families are descended in part, from English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh folk (and some others) who lived in small towns. The discovery and colonization of the New World, and in particular New England, was a safety valve in two ways: First it provided means, motive, and opportunity for persons who genuinely sought religious freedom to establish their own communities; second it provided an economic means, motive, and opportunity for the younger sons of large prominent families. Land had become scarce and expensive in England. Land was inexpensive and plentiful in the colonies. Our ancestors came west, across the Atlantic, crowded in little sailing ships.

The other part from which we are also liberally descended is the aristocracy and nobility, which had little future for their daughters and younger sons. These men and women had greater mobility and married within a wider range than those of lower classes. Some of their descendants ended up in the villages in later years because of the traditions of entail and primogeniture. "Entail" refers to the provision that all lands to be kept together to prevent their being fragmented in the hands of several people. "Primogeniture" simply means that the eldest son got it all. And if he died, then the next son got it. Once in a great while in early England, when there was no son to inherit, a daughter inherited land in her own right. A woman in this position became a most desirable candidate for a fine marriage in which her lands were combined with her husband's. Sometimes she even brought a title with her, which the husband assumed because she could not. We won't go into the details of English law here; people spend their lifetimes doing that, too. But these traditions determined who remained prominent and who did not. It was simply circumstance and if you had the bad luck to be one of the children born, that was that.

Suitable marriage partners among the nobility and aristocracy were chosen by parents. Repeatedly, in reading about these lines, one finds the male of a lesser family marrying the female of a more prominent family in order to gain status and position (or even a title or land). It's fascinating, but it wasn't romantic, unless by chance a romantic spark was struck in an arranged marriage. Because they had the means and the opportunity, combined with the motive, they married people from other parts of the kingdom or from other kingdoms and brought new genes to the pool.

Among the nobility, marriages often sealed alliances and bound kingdoms together. Europe was not the countries we now know but many smaller kingdoms vying for survival or control. This explains the marriage of an English/Scottish wife to King of All Ireland Brian Boru or a young princess of the house of Hanover who became Queen Victoria of England. And it explains the importance of each of the marriages of Eleanor of Aquitaine and whom Charlemagne married, not to mention whom William the Conqueror married or Edward III. In the First Millennium, some of these alliances drew partners from the Eastern Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, which means we have some fascinating surprises in our past.

No tiaras, please. We have no claim to any seat or peerage or throne and probably wouldn't want them if they were offered, but the histories of the countries of Europe of which our families have been a part, the measure of service on their part, the measure of trust on the part of those whose sovereigns they were, gives us a special responsibility in this world for integrity and for the stewardship of this planet.

Madge Griswold