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Shields: Comments on the Expansion of History
COMMENTS ON THE EXPANSION OF HISTORY

by Johanna Nicol Shields

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Until the 1960s, it could be said with some accuracy that most American history was "past politics." The subject matter of history reflected the interests of the men who wrote it—and in the early days of the discipline historians were nearly all Anglo-American men. Their background and training generally took place at one of a small number of highly selective (and expensive) universities in this country and abroad. In the decades after World War II, historians and history changed. Under the influence of the GI Bill, at first, and the National Defense Education Act, later, graduate programs mushroomed around the country and students began to be drawn from a more representative slice of the American population: from among women, the working class, recent immigrant families, and African-Americans, for example. Not surprisingly, these scholars knew that history was also about people like them, too. They opened new areas of investigation and brought new techniques to the study of ordinary people's lives. The new social history, of which family history and community history were parts, often required quantitative skills, knowledge of how to do genealogy, painstaking research in the raw census records and in state and local tax or probate records, marriage, birth, and death registers, and many other hidden places where plain people's lives could be reconstructed.

The history of the family is particularly intriguing since membership in a family is a common denominator for nearly all people. All of the opportunities and problems of society at large focus in the family in one way or another. The family was long at the center of the national economy as its chief unit of production. Families shape and are shaped by politics. As a result, it is accurate to say that no area of American history has gone unchanged by what scholars specializing in family history have learned. Much the same can be said of community history and the history of institutions within communities. These are topics that interest everyone. The history of family and community are reflected in our personal histories and they can be related to our present-day experiences. In contemporary public discussions, we often assume ideal historical models; yet, in fact, family and community structures, relationships, and values have exhibited enormous variation over time, by class, race, ethnicity, and region. Because this is true, when people contribute to the writing of their own histories, what professional historians know is expanded. Thus essays like those included in this publication may lay foundations for new understandings of Huntsville and its people.

(Taken from introductory remarks for the annual History Forum, "In Search of the American Family," April, 1994.)