Clio on the Frontier: The Intellectual Evolution of the Historical Society of New Mexico, 1859–1925

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Migrants moving into the new territories acquired at Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 arrived in New Mexico with notions about what they would find and how the culture they brought would enrich the frontier. After they confronted deeply-entrenched Indian and Hispano lifestyles and attitudes, however, the new arrivals felt less secure with their preconceptions. From that uncertainty arose a desire to preserve ideas of value from the civilization they had left behind, and a need to create a historical context for the advance of English-speaking settlers into the borderlands. The resulting apology the newcomers developed through organizations such as the Historical Society of New Mexico helped construct the intellectual framework within which frontiersmen and students of the frontier alike found rationales for expansionism, at least until new forms of historical and cultural analysis arose after the turn of the century.

Concerned residents of Santa Fe attempted as early as 1859 to develop some formal historical perspective for the changes that had recently occurred in the cultural milieu. On December 15 of that year, a group of men including many of the most influential in the territorial government met to organize a historical society. Those involved included Charles P. Clever, United States marshal in Santa Fe; Merrill Ashurst, Clever's sometime law partner; two territorial legislators, members of prominent New Mexican families, Facundo Pino and José Guadalupe Gallegos; Colonel John B. Grayson of the United States Army, stationed at Fort Marcy, the organization's first president; Major James Lowry Donaldson, also
of Fort Marcy, who succeeded to the presidency when Grayson resigned in 1861; and Kirby Benedict, chief justice of the Territorial Supreme Court.¹

The constitution for the Historical Society of New Mexico, adopted on December 26, 1859, made manifest the desire of the founders to strictly control membership. Initiation fees were set at a comparatively steep five dollars. Prospective members had to apply initially in writing and to secure recommendations from two persons who were already in the society. Applications then laid over until the next regular meeting, when three fourths of the membership were required to assent. The high fees particularly warded off any unwanted applications and had the central effect of limiting applications to the highest echelon of New Mexican society, i.e., American merchants and bureaucrats and the rico segment of Hispanic citizenry. Of the more than 100 applications that came to a vote before the society adjourned sine die in 1863, all came from the upper stratum, and only two failed.²

The constitution left no doubt either concerning the direction in which the members’ minds should travel. “We whose names are hereunto annexed,” the preamble announced, “fully impressed with the vast field for historical research which surrounds [sic]; determined to devote our best energies to the elucidation of the history of this country, hitherto unwritten, and anxious to cooperate in combined effort, for this object, do now form an association. . . .”³ To fulfill their commission, the society’s supporters swore to work toward “the collection and preservation, under its own care and direction, of all historical facts, manuscripts, documents, records and memoirs, relating to this territory; Indian antiquities and curiosities, geological and minerological specimens, geographical maps and information, and objects of natural history.” To promote these specific ends, the constitution provided for six permanent sections, each to handle a given task: First, History, to gather chronologies; second, Geography; third, Indian Races; fourth, Geology and Minerology; fifth, Antiquities and Collections, to care for the material accumulated by the other sections; and sixth, Natural History, dedicated to plants and animals.⁴ By the time of the second regular meeting, however, the membership found these initial categories too restrictive, and they
voted to add five more sections including Agriculture, Statistics, Botany, Biography, and Meteorology and Climatology.\(^5\)

Good intentions and firm initial resolve, however, neither assure an organization’s success nor prevent a historical society from dissolving into a social function. In the case of the Historical Society of New Mexico, the members maintained a high level of participation in consonance with the goals of the constitution. Talks were given on a wide variety of subjects ranging from natural history through national politics.\(^6\) Donations to collections ranged from books and periodicals through specimens of flora and fauna to objects of curiosity.\(^7\) The approach to history these activities suggest is, of course, consistent with general nineteenth-century American attitudes. Clear distinctions between things historical and things scientific did not yet exist, at least in popular philosophy; for these men, history included all facets of human experience, regardless of its origin. Empirics all, society members sought to understand the whole of their surroundings.

Upon the first anniversary of the historical society, celebrated New Year’s Eve, 1860, Chief Justice Kirby Benedict addressed the membership and focused on the function of the organization and its proper role in illuminating the history of the territory. “‘Tis now one year,” Benedict began, “since this association was wrought into form. It sprung [sic] from a profound mental want in our natures. It flowed from the deep, restless desire of the cultivated mind to seize upon all objects which may aid in the solution of that most interesting of all problems—MAN'S EXISTENCE AND DESTINY.”\(^8\) For the Historical Society of New Mexico, that study began at home, with those who in the history of the Southwest provided rational, clearheaded leadership, those “who took experience, joined it with intuition, and melded them into truth and wisdom.” This progression started with Columbus, who “introduced the New World to the European mind.”\(^9\) Then for Benedict came the other gallant Spanish explorers and settlers: “Whoever they were, they were no common, ordinary spirits. Known circumstances prove they must have been men and women of the stoutest heroic qualities.”\(^10\)

The Spaniards brought with them two gifts of permanence for the natives. First they offered “the laws and civilization with
Regular Meeting

Santa Fe, 9. 36
September 28, 1863

The meeting was called to order by the President.

The proceedings of the last meeting were read and approved.

Mr. Ochard offered the following:

Resolved, that the money of the Society be committed to
the fund and stock, and the property article, as may
be designated by a committee of three, to be appointed
by the President; for that purpose, in case any balance
may be applied to anything else, the same, to be applied to
the stock of the Society.

To which Mr. Blowman offered the following:

That the balance of the Society is duly invested in
perpetual and both care of such property, things, or
monies, as shall be retained until further instructions be
made by the Society.

The closed tendered will be examined and considered.

New York, September 28. The President

Resolved, that the 3rd of October shall be the last date of
notices to the Society, designate the committee for
omitting the proceedings of sales, and of
paying the expenses, the same to be paid, the balance
in the amount, which was also paid.

The following gentlemen were then appointed by the Society
as committee to solicit the property to be retained:

New York, September

Ochard & Brent

Mr. Blowman, Jr.

The meeting adjourned, the same to be

Mr. Ochard.

The President.
which they had been instructed and reared in the lands of their birth. They spread over these valleys, and at once strove to realize the highest life the age had then developed." Second, the Spaniards pushed out from their native land "to carry the name of JESUS and the Sacraments to the idolator who knew nothing of the Christian or his faith—to subjugate inferiors to an acknowledgment of the Spanish crown," and, incidentally, "to win by deeds and merit equal position with those to whom the accidents of birth and inherited fortunes had imparted factitious advantages." 12

Their greatest achievement, Benedict continued in his paean to the Spaniards, came from qualities of tenacity and an ability to succeed in these goals despite overwhelming odds. "They had the untamed Indian for their enemy, and fought him as they met him. Let us do justice to all men who reclaimed from barbarism the various portions of the New World." 13

Violence had receded somewhat and civilization had gained a foothold by 1860, but the chief justice warned his listeners that they, the newcomers to the area, had now inherited many of the same problems the Spaniards faced. "Here we are, surrounded by the wild mountain savage. . . . He ever has been, and still is, the ceaseless foe to the advancement of this country. He hems in, cramps and discourages the spirits and energies of this people." 14 The Pueblo Indians, though "widely different in habits and character," still constituted a threat because of their suppressed idolatries; the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 had proven that. 15

Continuity of historical pattern, reasoned Judge Benedict, showed that the past becomes present whenever it is subjected to close scrutiny. Careful consideration of history constituted the central responsibility for those assembled in the society's rooms that New Year's Eve. "Members of the Historical Society of New Mexico! . . . Do we feel as we should the duties we have chosen? . . . The New Mexican historian stands at the base of the height of more than three hundred years of the white man's life. . . . These are the people who must ever command the deepest attention of him who shall attempt to trace the historic page with truth and certainty." 16

Thus did Benedict, a representative of these thoughtful men,
give voice to the link between a progressive interpretation of history and social dogma. The movement of Anglo settlers into the Southwest, the chief justice argued, represented more than just new veneer on an antique civilization. As Spaniards came with the new light of hope represented in Christendom, so now the most recent advent of men from the East promised further progress through wisdom gathered and applied scientifically. No better example of the truth of this premise could be found than in the existence of the historical society. History, after all, was a science and at the same time incorporated other sciences as part of the study of human experience, drawing all into a perspective within which "man, the thinking, conscious being, is seen in concert with the objects." 17

The state of the nation and the preoccupation of much of the membership with the national crisis did not encourage the success of the society's good intentions. By the mid-part of 1861 many of the strongest supporters from the army garrison returned, like President Grayson, to the battlefields in the East. Others were caught up, like Grayson's successor Donaldson, in the military affairs of New Mexico. The society survived the Confederate incursion into the territory and the brief occupation of Santa Fe in March 1862, but the disruption and dislocation that the war caused and growing debates over territorial administration did irreparable damage. By the middle of 1863, the remaining members decided to halt the organization's activities; on September 28, 1863, they met to accomplish the dissolution. At that meeting, the members gave the curator full authority to sell all or part of the society's collections to meet its debts. Having thus provided for clearance of possible action against the organization, the members voted to adjourn sine die. 18

The goals of the first society did not die, however, although seventeen years of national and territorial turmoil elapsed before the few remaining members and other New Mexicans met to discuss reconstitution. Chief among the newer supporters of historical activity were William G. Ritch, territorial secretary and later governor, and Lebaron Bradford Prince, who was territorial governor when interest in the society grew once more. Upon the twenty-first anniversary of the founding of the original society,
December 26, 1880, these men led a gathering that reconvened the Historical Society of New Mexico. The reorganized society adopted verbatim all but a few provisions of the 1859 constitution. Ritch became president; Prince took the vice-presidency and succeeded to the higher office in 1894.

In his inaugural address delivered on February 21, 1881, President Ritch echoed many of the sentiments that Kirby Benedict espoused twenty years earlier. Progress still measured the course of history, and time for a revival of historical study on a formal level had come as more and more signal events transformed the Southwest. “From the year 1880 dates the advent of the railroad into the valley of the Rio Grande—from thence communicating through the cardinal points of the world. Manifestly, it is an event to be fraught with the grandest results ever yet known to this most ancient and historical land.” The aims of the Historical Society of New Mexico, in light of this grand transformation yet in progress, should be clear: “We do not assume to originate any new system; nor is success thus dependent. Historical societies in the world of science, are among the oldest. We have only to consult freely, and be guided by, the light of the past—adopting that finally which shall best prove itself adapted to our necessities, and our future will be assured.” To have material close at hand from which such lessons could be learned, Ritch set out the procedures for accomplishing the society’s mandate in the clearest possible terms—collect, but leave the interpretation and teaching to others. Preserve the stuff of history for “the future historian and antiquarian.” The society could work toward these ends as had the earlier organization, with sections designed to channel the members’ efforts along specific lines. Accordingly, the membership of the reconstituted group heartily endorsed the six divisions spelled out in the original constitution, apparently unaware that the first society had found them to be too constricting.

In addition to larger considerations such as providing the research material from which others could build history, Ritch set several more practical goals. Members’ efforts should be aimed, he believed, toward belaying the increasing number of artifacts of New Mexico’s heritage that newcomers were trying to carry away. To help stop pillage, the society should educate the public about
the past and demonstrate the value of the territorial archives and other antiquities. In doing so, the society would achieve another good by promoting pride and patriotism. Ritch quoted James Smithson's aphorism that "the man of science has no country; the world is his country and all men are his countrymen," but he also counseled the members of the historical society to promote cultural awareness and promulgate a healthy, non-belligerent patriotism in the manner of the Smithsonian Institution.24

In practical terms, Ritch told the members, they could achieve the goals he had outlined by starting an active campaign to use and save the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe, the oldest continuing seat of government in the United States or its territories. The old building lay in disrepair. The federal government still held title and was unwilling to spend money for renovation. If the society obtained permission to use all or part, and in the process made repairs, then a great service would have been done New Mexico. The building would also serve as a magnet to draw the right kind of visitors—pilgrims to the shrines of history, not looters of them.25

The Historical Society of New Mexico did obtain permission to meet in the Palace in 1882. Shortly thereafter, the federal government transferred ownership of the building to the territorial government, but neither the society nor the territory had sufficient funds to restore completely either the adobe exterior or the rundown interior. The society did refurbish two rooms in the southeast corner of the Palace, using one as a meeting place and the other as an exhibition hall to house collections. L. Bradford Prince, who became president in 1884, continually sent entreaties to Washington for funds to restore the society's home. He dunned the Park Service, the Smithsonian, and Congress, all to no avail.26

Prince's lack of success in the years after the turn of the century prompted the territorial government to act on its own. In 1906, the territorial legislature undertook negotiations with Edgar Lee Hewett, who represented the Archaeological Institute of America. Hewett, born in the United States but educated in Switzerland, had just begun to acquire a reputation in his native country as an ethnologist and archaeologist of Central and South American cultures, and he wished to develop an organization to serve as a
school and a base for expeditions throughout the Southwest. He believed that Santa Fe provided an ideal location and that the Palace of the Governors offered many possibilities as a headquarters. 27

An irate Bradford Prince wrote his objections to Charles Fletcher Lummis, a vice-president of the Archaeological Institute, a student of things Southwestern, and a friend of Prince's. This was New Mexican culture that was being tampered with, not South American, Prince protested. Lummis replied, to Prince's chagrin, that while he understood the society's objections from a parochial viewpoint, within a larger perspective Hewett's proposed center for study would enhance historical work in New Mexico as well as the lands to the south. The Archaeological Institute, moreover, had the money to restore the Palace. Lummis assured Prince that Hewett would do a good job of restoration, faithful to the original. 28

Despite Prince's failure to muster outside support, the society continued its objections to Hewett's occupancy. In 1908, however, the territorial legislature approved the proposal to allow the newcomer to use the Palace as his school. By early 1909 Hewett had prepared to move into the portion of the structure not occupied by the society, and he so informed Prince. Since the legislature had specifically forbidden any disruption of the society's rooms, Hewett had no choice but amiability, and he wrote to Prince of his willingness to cooperate. He had surveyed the society's collections, he reported in March 1909, and he was sufficiently impressed that he favored a joint display of the society's artifacts with those of his School of American Archaeology to create a genuinely impressive picture of pueblo life. 29 He evidently heard nothing from Prince, since he reiterated his offer in a letter sent a week later and again in another, more impatient note sent on March 30. Prince indirectly replied through a letter to Lummis on April 12, which complained that Hewett and the Institute had no intention of preserving the Palace correctly, and that the society still opposed an encroachment. 30 Consequently, Hewett should not have been surprised when he received formal rejection of his offer on July 7. 31

Prince sincerely believed that Hewett sought to destroy or at
least neutralize the Historical Society. He blamed this attitude on the professional snobbery of the school's director, and he never forgave Hewett for that real or fancied failing. Moreover, Prince believed that the society had by right of prior activity earned the custodianship of the state's heritage, and he would not relinquish that title without a struggle. Governor Prince felt that Hewett had never given the society credit for saving the Palace in the first place, nor for collecting the material that he now claimed to find so impressive a view of New Mexico's past. And Hewett's reports to the Archaeological Institute bear out Prince's convictions in some measure—the director wrote only of the renovation the school did to the building. By 1911 it was obvious that Hewitt considered the society to be an impediment when he recorded that "all of the Palace's rooms have been put in order, except for the two occupied by the Historical Society." In that same report to the Archaeological Institute, he complained that the school's quarters had become "altogether inadequate," clearly pointing to the rooms not under his jurisdiction.\textsuperscript{32}

In fact, the jurisdictional question led to the final major confrontation between Hewett and Prince, one which dealt as severe a blow to the process of collecting New Mexico's past as had the disbursement of the first society's collections in 1863. In September 1913, Hewett demanded keys to the society's rooms in the Palace in order to have full access to the building for which, he claimed, the legislature had given him responsibility in 1908. Prince, of course, refused to acknowledge Hewett's claim of custodianship and with legislative backing won the point without ever surrendering keys.\textsuperscript{33} But pressure from the school for access to the society's collections did not ease during the next two years, and in 1915 Hewett once again proposed that the exhibits of the society and his organization be merged in the Museum of New Mexico, founded in 1911 as the school's showcase. Once again, Prince refused on behalf of the society.\textsuperscript{34} During this period of conflict, at what precise time no one seems to know, Prince became so concerned over the inviolability of the collections that he took home much of the material. At this death in 1922, those artifacts and documents went into his estate. Some vanished, and some appeared in mouldering condition at his son's home years later. Like the sale at the
time of the first society’s adjournment, these unfortunate circumstances cost future historians dearly.

Severe illness after 1916 prevented Prince from serving the society in anything but an advisory role, but he continued his active interest in its doings. He dubbed Ralph Emerson Twitchell to be his successor, and the new president kept Prince at least moderately well informed of the society’s affairs. But Twitchell apparently forgave past slights more easily, or did not consider Hewett in the same light as did Prince. In early December 1919, the former president wrote to a friend that “my wife just read in the ‘New Mexican’ that the first meeting [of the society] on December 26 is for general discussion, etc. and among those mentioned as speakers is Dr. Hewett. . . . I have not seen the announcement but it is certainly very queer after the way he has treated us and tried to destroy us.”

His increasing distance from the society’s affairs after 1916 also spared Prince from recognizing the gradual change in the makeup of the organization’s leadership in a process that began in 1917 and continued for three years after Prince’s death in 1922. He had passed the presidency to Twitchell, but even this trusted successor did not share all of Prince’s predispositions about the directions the organization should take. Ralph Twitchell was distinctly aware of new attitudes in historical study, an emphasis upon the collection and distribution of factual material, as represented in his central contribution to his state’s historiography, *Leading Facts of New Mexican History* (5 volumes, 1911–1912). Prince on the other hand represented several of the generation of older members who had brought forward the ideals of the first society, a dedication to an omnilogical view of history diametrically opposed to the more limited historicism of Hewett. And during the two years after Twitchell took the gavel in 1916, men came into the society straight from Hewett’s fold, carrying Hewett’s philosophy. Paul A. F. Walter joined late in 1916 after having served as executive secretary of the School of American Archaeology since 1913. Lansing Bloom became a member in the next year while acting as the school’s first associate in history, a post Hewett created to incorporate a close association with history not possible with the historical society. Walter and Bloom assumed an
"Gov. Prince Reception Room," Room #2, Palace of the Governors, Santa Fe, ca. 1915. Courtesy Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe.
increasingly active role in the society into the 1920s, and their continued association with the school through the decade made differences fade away between the historical society and the school’s new history division. After Twitchell’s death, Walter became president in 1925 and Bloom secretary; by the next year they had produced the first issue of the *New Mexico Historical Review*, a journal cast very much in the new professional mold. And Hewett, through his reports to the Institute and his position in the Santa Fe social order, assumed most of the credit for work Walter and Bloom did for the society, since they were employed by the school, thus making the society an empty shell. After 1925 the society withered and experienced growing difficulty in drawing members out beyond the nominal affiliation needed to remain on the *Review’s* subscription roster.

The historical society and its more professional rivals, the school and the museum, grew out of two different sets of values and philosophies. When they clashed, and given the circumstances surrounding the confrontation, many of the newer generation from Twitchell on subordinated the traditional ideals of the society as represented by Prince to the newer concepts of history as represented by Hewett. Prince sensed the threat early on and tried to fend off the influence of these “outside” forces, but the emergence of Hewett as a strong personality and the school and museum as viable institutions undercut his opposition. The social outlook of Kirby Benedict and others of the first society, refurbished at the end of the century by Ritch, Prince, and others, had evolved as much from a need to secure for themselves a permanent place on the frontier as from any abstract respect for history. They emphasized the Anglo pioneer experience, using the rest of history to point to the natural ascendency of the new order. The founders and movers of the historical society, through their particular use of history, came to see themselves as a logical extension of the progress of civilization. They preached the gospel of science and the optimism of history from their conceptions of those fields of study, just as their Spanish predecessors had spread the gospel of Christ. Hewett, trained to emphasize the historian as observer rather than as participant, could not fathom such an attitude. Hence when he and his fellows, teaching the historicist’s skepticism of cultural values implicit in historical methodology, came
into range of the men of the historical society, they threatened both the society's existence and the foundations of history in which men from Benedict to Prince had felt themselves secured.

Attitudes within the older society about the use of history in the affirmation of progress through time did not originate, of course, on the frontier. Benedict's view of the past reflected an amalgam of many philosophies of history from enlightenment progressivism through a romantic emphasis on the necessity for great men, a not uncommon mix in nineteenth-century America. Nor was the New Mexico society's experience strictly unique; similar historically-oriented organizations sprang up throughout the Mexican Cession in the last half of the nineteenth century. But aspects of this story set it apart. The New Mexico society did not originate to glorify the efforts of the pioneers per se, as did parallel organizations in Arizona and California. It concerned itself with things of the spirit, not of the flesh, and consequently did not take up arms against a physical threat as did the Arizona Pioneers against the Apache. The Colorado Historical and Natural History Society sundered over the same changes in attitude about what constituted history that sparked the Hewett-Prince feud, but the Colorado split originated internally and not from the outside. Nor in New Mexico did the added complexity of yet another vision of history add to the turmoil, as it did for Latter-day Saints in Utah. In many ways, the New Mexico experience provides a touchstone from which to analyze the intellectual development of similar groups in frontier environments, as clearly defined attitudes came into open conflict, and notions of history evolved with changes in culture and society.

The men of the Historical Society of New Mexico, at least those before 1925, spoke in large measure as participants trying to apply historical precepts to culture rather than as observers seeking to understand cultures through uncritical study. In the process of adapting their preconceptions to their new environment, the frontiersmen evolved a series of pictures of life on the frontier that gave direction and meaning to their lives. Those images eventually created a mythic view of the process of acculturation in the West, especially when later observers discerned the disappearance of the same positive values in American life generally as a product of the contraction of the frontier. Frederick Jackson Turner warned cor-
rectly that American images of rugged individualism, heroic fearlessness in the face of natural and human savagery, devotion to freedom and liberty at all costs, and other traits that he attributed to the existence of the frontier were fading from the consciousness of the American people. He failed, however, to recognize one signal fact: The images were themselves largely creations of the frontiersmen, springing from the necessity to develop a cultural framework within which to deal with otherwise confusing experiences. The values so developed had some relation to fact, having grown from bits of truth and memory. Greater impetus came from the human need for a mythic structure in which good and bad, positive and negative, were clearly distinguishable. Physical frontiers and their mythical virtues did disappear under successive waves of civilization, but only because of simultaneous exploration which opened new frontiers of the mind, with concomitantly better understanding of the real meaning of virtue.

NOTES

3. Constitution of the Historical Society of New Mexico, recorded in Minute Book, December 26, 1859.
5. Minute Book, February 27, 1860.
7. Minute Book, January 30, 1860, February 27, 1860, gives examples of donations such as the carved coat of arms from ex-Governor Manuel Armijo’s executive office door, Atlantic Monthly and Scientific American, and “a bottle containing a very curious mechanism.”
8. Anniversary Address Presented to the Historical Society of New Mexico on December 31, 1860, by Kirby Benedict, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Territory (Santa Fe: Manderfield and Tucker, Printers, [1861]), p. 3. Original in the Library of Congress; only known copy.
10. Anniversary Address, p. 11.
11. Anniversary Address, p. 15.
13. Anniversary Address, pp. 11-12.
17. Anniversary Address, p. 5.
21. Inaugural Address, p. 4.
22. Inaugural Address, p. 5.
23. Constitution, recorded in Inaugural Address, p. 19.
24. Inaugural Address, p. 6.
25. Inaugural Address, pp. 9-10.
26. Prince to Hugh A. Dinsmore, Regent of the Smithsonian, January 15, 1902, Governors' Papers (GP), SRCA.
28. Charles Lummis to Prince, August 10, 1907, GP, SRCA.
29. Edgar Hewett to Prince, March 10, 1909, GP, SRCA.
30. Hewett to Prince, March 30, 1909; Prince to Lummis, April 12, 1909, GP, SRCA.
31. Prince to Hewett, July 7, 1909, GP, SRCA.
33. Hewett to Prince, September 11, 1913; Prince to Museum Board of Regents, July 12, 1915, GP, SRCA.
34. Prince to Museum Board of Regents, July 12, 1915, GP, SRCA.
35. Prince to W. M. Berger, Belen, N.M. [December] 1919, GP, SRCA.