

The Centennial of New York State Assembly Bill #160

November is New York State History Month and this year there's something unique to commemorate: the centennial of the New York State law that mandates a historian in each town, village, and city in the state.

Also known as the Historians' Law, Governor Alfred E. Smith signed into law on April 11, 1919, a bill that said, "*A local historian shall be appointed, as provided in this section, for each city, town, or village...and a county historian may be appointed for each county.*" This made New York State the first state to have a network of officially appointed local historians. The law was initially intended to collect information about New York State's participation in World War I that ended in November 1918 but the law came just a few years after the March 1911 fire in Albany that destroyed over 800,000 books and manuscripts in the State library so the secondary impetus of the new law was the preservation of local history.

Municipal historians serve their communities in a variety of ways. The New York State law requires them to collect and preserve history, to do research and publish, to assist with commemorative celebrations, and to advocate for historic preservation. Under this umbrella, historians work with school children, create presentations for local groups, write books, conduct tours of local cemeteries, serve on historic preservation boards, answer queries from genealogists, and write newspaper columns. Some even teach cursive handwriting.

Brighton's first town historian was Laura Holton Benedict who served as town historian from 1919 until her death in 1929. As in many other communities, Brighton did not appoint another historian right away.

In 1944 the Brighton town board decided to allocate \$25.00 in the 1945 town budget to cover the costs of appointing a town historian. A. Emerson Babcock is listed in the records of the Monroe County history department for the years 1944 through 1949 with Frances Coleman as deputy historian from 1948 through 1954. Dorothy Cumpston was appointed in 1950 and served until 1952. Raymond Keople succeeded her until his death in 1958. Margaret Schmitt MacNab served from 1958 to 1986. Her successor is Mary Jo Lanphear.

If all the municipal historians' positions are filled, New York State would have 938 town historians, 567 village historians, 61 city historians, 57 county historians, five borough historians in the greater New York City area, and 12 community historians (borough of Manhattan) for a grand total of 1640 persons. In reality however, a full complement of historians has never been accomplished due to the death of historians in office, changes in political affiliation, or disregard for the law.

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