Report of the Regional Studies Working Group

National Endowment for the Humanities

November 1999

NEH, Regionalism, and the Humanities **2**

Thinking Regionally 2
Regionalism and the Humanities 4

NEH Support for Regional Study **6**

Overview 6
Expressions of America 10
Places to Visit 11
Roads and Rivers 12
Mapping Differences 12
Recalling the Past 13

Regional Initiatives **13**

Regional Humanities Centers 14
My History is America's History 16

Conclusion **18**

Members of the Working Group **19**

Endnotes **20**

NEH, REGIONALISM AND THE HUMANITIES

> One place comprehended can make us understand other places better. Sense of place gives us equilibrium; extended, it is sense of direction too.
>
> —Eudora Welty

Wherever we go, whatever we do, many of us carry with us a strong sense of place, a home where we belong. While media, global markets, and the Internet pull us away, this sense of place roots us and becomes entwined with who we are. "Where are you from?" we ask people we meet. All of us, after all, come from some place, and many of us feel connected to places—that house, farmstead, apartment; neighborhood, town, or city; county, state, and region—where we grew up, where we have left, or where we live. When we think about these places, we remember ways of talking, the look of seasons, the special foods, the manners there. These places shape our identities and drive our imaginations.

When we stand back from these particular places, we see regions, which form a wonderfully diverse patchwork extending across the nation. We are Americans, but we are also Midwesterners, Southerners, New Englanders, Westerners. And those of us born outside the United States have come *to,* and reside *in,* some region of the U.S. Like the particular localities in which we reside, regions help shape and define our collective identities in significant and lasting ways.

The National Endowment for the Humanities has a long tradition of support for regionally-oriented projects in research, education, preservation, and public programming. To broaden and intensify this work, NEH is undertaking new initiatives under the theme of Rediscovering America through Place and Region. In the pages that follow we sketch out the relationship between the humanities and regionalism, summarize the kinds of support the Endowment has provided for regional projects and set forth in broad outline the work we propose to accomplish.

Thinking Regionally

In a nation as large and varied as the United States it is not surprising that people divide the country into regions. The official boundaries that define states, counties, townships, and cities do not map the diversity of the U.S. as accurately or suggestively as do regional distinctions. Thinking regionally is a way of organizing our conception of the nation as a whole, either for pragmatic reasons or because it fits an impressionistic sense of place—that sense of place that Eudora Welty says "gives us equilibrium" and, when "extended," gives us a "sense of direction, too."[1]

Regional arrangements fill many purposes. Sports teams compete within regionally-organized leagues. Marketers track what sells in one region but which products buyers resist in another. Professional societies subdivide into regional affiliates. Most of us think of the U.S. in regional terms. Regional diversity is a source of intellectual interest as well as national pride. We know our own locales—the terrain, the climate, the types of flora and fauna—but we also carry impressions of other regions as comparative contexts for our own. The West is arid, vast and wide; the Midwest fertile, flat and grassy; the South lush, hot and humid; the Pacific Northwest wet, cool and green. Such stereotypes mask deeper presumptions about ways of life in different regions. We each occupy our own place, yet we also imaginatively occupy other places where we might want to visit, to live someday—or to avoid. This is one way in which each of us "possesses" the nation as a whole, through the places we know and the places we only know about.

Nearly everyone would agree that the U.S. has regions, but people disagree—sometimes heatedly—about what those regions are or where their boundaries lie. The most familiar way of defining regions, and the one most likely to achieve consensus, is by direction: the "West," the "South," the "Midwest," the "Southwest," the "Pacific Northwest." But even with these the borders are contested. Is Texas in the South, the West, the Southwest? Kentucky belongs where? Should the southern portions of Indiana and Illinois be considered Midwest or South? Other regions are defined by geographical features, as when we speak of the "Upper Mississippi Valley," the "Chesapeake Region," or the "Great Plains." Regions can also be drawn from history, as are "New England," the "Northwest Territory," and the "Confederacy." Designations for regions may carry connotations beyond their literal referents: "Appalachia," for example, is based on a topographical feature but evokes assumptions about economic and cultural conditions. Our sense of regions comes from the landscapes and ways of life that can be discovered in them, but we also construct regions out of how we talk about them, how we impute behaviors, manners, and values to parts of the country. Although regions often carry nostalgic associations, they also constantly change, and new ones emerge in response to changing perceptions and circumstances, such as "the Bible belt," "Silicon Valley," or "the Sunbelt."

Although grounded in place, region probably depends less on geography than on variations in ways of daily life, of differences in cultural characteristics, even on broad questions of social and political organization, of how individuals associate themselves with each other. The term "region" signals a complex of attitudes, behaviors, and traits, real or imagined. Regional ties are grounded as well in emotions associated with but also transcending particular places. People carry images and myths of their region with them when they move into a new region. For example, when people from a predominantly rural area, such as the American South early in this century, moved to urban environments "up North," they often sought land where they could plant the gardens they would have had "back home." Indeed, the opportunity or lack of opportunity to maintain habits and traditions from "home" can define just how a regional heritage is maintained or lost. Regional variation reaches beyond place to chart the ever-changing diversity of our national life.

According to the editors of the *Dictionary of American Regional English,* the definition of a regional term is "any word or phrase whose form or meaning is not used generally throughout the United States."[2] Similarly, a region might be regarded as any portion of the United States that has traits, perceived or ascribed, not found in all parts of the nation. Certainly regions exist in no absolute or fixed sense but in the context of other regions and of the nation, and in the flow of changing circumstances and perceptions.

That Americans identify with these matters and argue vociferously about them attests to the importance of region. But the question of defining regions or regional differences is less important than understanding when and how they make a difference: "a key issue for students of regionalism is to explain why some cultural distinctions come to matter, while so many do not, in the construction of collective identities."[3] To some, regional distinctions matter for the very reason that they are being lost to the leveling effects of mass media and consumer culture. As one commentator puts it, the study of regional differences "can be valuable as long as it addresses the actual plight of regional distinctiveness."[4]

We do not, in short, always know what "region" is or ought to be, but common sense tells us there is such a phenomenon. We do not always know how important it is, but good sense tells us it matters.

Regionalism and the Humanities

Concerned primarily with heritage—including history, culture, and folklore—the humanities disciplines are ideally suited to help us understand the significance of the nation's regions, however defined. The humanities have the capacity to illuminate how individuals relate to the large patterns of history, society, literature, art, and geography. The public's fascination with genealogy and local history attests to an interest in *connectedness*—to the past and to place in the world, as well as to family, gender, race, and class.

Interest in the study of regional cultures is high in academic programs as well as among public audiences. While it may be an overstatement to say, as a recent *New York Times* article does, that regional centers "are popping up everywhere," it is no exaggeration to say that regional study "is fashionable at American universities as it has not been since at least the 1930s."[5] Reference to the 1930s brings to mind the major regionalist scholars of the period between the world wars, figures like Lewis Mumford and Walter Prescott Webb, who legitimized the study of particular American places and who saw regional values as a possible response to modern life, which seemed both increasingly fragmented and culturally homogeneous.[6] In the fifteen to twenty years after World War II academic interest in regionalism waned in the face of strong nationalizing forces such as air travel, interstate highways, television, and global concerns generated by the Cold War and America's enhanced sense of world involvement. But the 1970s saw renewed interest in regional studies, including the establishment of academic centers and programs, such as the Center for Great Plains Studies (University of Nebraska) and the Center for the Study of Southern Culture (University of Mississippi). Regionalism encompassed new directions in humanities disciplines, such as history, anthropology, and folklore, that paid increased attention to the importance of everyday life to the study of history.

The resurgence of interest in regions cited by the *New York Times* goes far beyond the celebration of regional distinctiveness. Scholars are concerned not only with traits that can be discovered empirically, but also with how groups tend to construct cultural identities, how we ascribe distinctiveness to ourselves and to others. Questions of boundaries, for example, are explored not so much with an eye to establishing where one region ends and another begins, but with how cultural phenomena overlap and interact. Studies of the landscape are also studies of the environment, of how the land is used and misused and of how humans have affected the land and how the land has affected the humans who inhabit it.

The disciplines and methods of the humanities can better enable us to understand regional America and the individual's place in it. The humanities highlight connections between the land and its various inhabitants, connections that have profoundly influenced the country's myths, ideas, artistic expressions, and politics. For example, the study of region leads us to consider *context*, to pay close attention to the ways historical events and artistic expressions and cultural traditions occur, not in a void, but in particular places and under particular circumstances. Region is at the center of a continuum of contexts that affect every individual, ranging from the familial to the local through the regional to the national and the global. The impassioned localism that motivates the historical preservationist can lead to broad investigations of the past; the urgency of local debates on environmental policy can deepen our understanding of the complex and changing relationship between the region's landscape and human settlement.

The study of region also raises fundamental questions about identity at the personal, group, and national levels, including the often vexing issue of the relationships among groups within and across regions. Regional identities give inflection to other sources of identity, such as ethnicity or gender. People are often, in varying degrees, identifiable by regional "markers" such as diction and accent, manners and customs, food preferences and attire, sense of landscape and distance; people also often shape their identities in resistance to regionally familiar characteristics. Studying identity within a region requires close attention to conflicts and accommodations, to the multiple ways humans interact in specific circumstances and specific places. The humanities offer us tools for understanding the complementary ways that region affects identity and the ways personal identity matters in understanding region.[7]

No study of the West, for instance, is complete without a thorough understanding of the role of women in settling the frontier. From *Gone With the Wind* to *Glory*, from Robert Johnson to B.B. King, from William Faulkner to Richard Wright, students of the South know that an awareness of race is critical to understanding southern identity. No scholar studying immigration patterns in Boston or no visitor to New York's Lower East Side Tenement Museum can ignore the vital importance of class in our nation's history. An appreciation of modern-day tensions among inhabitants of the Southwest requires an understanding of the historical fight for control of the land among Anglos, Latinos, and Indians. These kinds of concerns, fundamental to our increasingly multicultural society, inform humanistic regional study.

The study of regions encourages a healthy mixing of approaches in the humanities. Regional studies are naturally interdisciplinary because few aspects of a region's culture can be fully described by the subject matter or methods of a single field. Language, linguistics, literature; history, politics, and jurisprudence; philosophy, religion, ethical values and community mores; archaeology; the history and understanding of the arts; the histories of science and industry—the methods and subjects of all these disciplines can be integrated to record and comprehend a region's history, culture, and people. The development of the blues, for example, cannot be examined solely in terms of music history: the investigator will be led to cross the boundaries of that discipline to explore the role played by religion and gospel, by work and economic class, or by race relations in creating the blues. An economic historian seeking to explain the effects of declining industry, which caused a region to be labeled the "Rustbelt," might be led to examine the ripple effect that economic events exert on political relations, on religious institutions, and even on literary and artistic expression.

The humanities allow us to acknowledge and better understand the intellectual complexity inherent in describing regions and peoples without losing the important truth that regions are real places with real people living in them. From the perspective of the humanities, whatever regions are, they also places defined by the convictions of their inhabitants; by myths about their founding and their original residents; by their histories over the centuries since they first took shape; by their landscapes and natural resources; by religious beliefs and institutions; by diversities of ethnic identity and gender role; by language and art, music and poetry, architecture and engineering marvel; by industry, farm, and commerce; by customs and manners and foods. Such complexity of definition and description are the very warp and woof of the humanities.

NEH SUPPORT FOR REGIONAL STUDY

Overview

The National Endowment for the Humanities has, throughout its thirty-five-year existence, responded to and played a key role in promoting the nation's interest in regions. Regionalism has served as a lens through which humanistic study of complex issues has been viewed, and, conversely, the methods and perspectives of the humanities have enriched our understanding of various aspects of regional America. NEH grants to academic and cultural institutions have enabled thousands of Americans to examine their region's past and present and to explore its links with other regions and countries. **Since 1966 the Endowment has awarded over $370 million in grant support for regionally oriented projects**. For example, the Endowment's Division of Research Programs conducted a program in State, Local, and Regional Studies from 1977 through 1982. The program, initiated following the upsurge of interest in regional history associated with the Bicentennial observance in 1976, supported research and development of new materials and methods useful both to professional scholars and to members of historical societies and organizations, museums, and others seriously concerned with the study of the nation's heritage. Under this program, NEH funded nearly 150 projects around the country—studies of small towns, large cities, tribal communities; studies of whaling in Alaska, coal mining in West Virginia, the judiciary in Hawaii, town development in Idaho and Washington, and suburban sprawl in Texas.

Through NEH support Americans have acquired new resources for "placing" themselves in their communities and for engaging newcomers as well as longtime residents in forging a dynamic and creative vision—"direction" as Eudora Welty would say—for the future. Endowment grants have funded broad-based national projects that build a foundation for enriching our understanding of all regions as well as discrete projects that explore some particular aspect of regionalism. The national projects provide resources needed for scholars, teachers, and the public to engage in regional study. Through preservation information and referral services, workshops, seminars, surveys and disaster response assistance, NEH-supported service programs increase the permanent capacity of institutions large and small, urban and rural—institutions such as libraries, archival repositories, or museums—to care for their regional and local collections. For example, especially vital reservoirs of regional information are the newspapers that chronicle the daily life of a region's citizens. A major NEH initiative, the United States Newspaper Program, leads a national effort to locate, catalog, preserve on microfilm, and make available U.S. newspapers from the eighteenth century to the present.

The *Dictionary of American Regional English* is another noteworthy example of a national, regionally oriented resource supported by NEH. DARE documents the rich variety of spoken and written English in the United States. What you call something as mundane as a pancake can say a lot about where you hail from: a "battercake" in the South is a "flannel cake" in the Appalachians, a "flitter" in the middle South, a "griddle cake" or a "slapjack" in parts of the North; or it might be a "hotcake" in most places except New England or a "wheat cake" in the Northeast or Atlantic areas. Other examples of Endowment-supported resources that are national in scope yet invaluable for regional and local understanding are the *Atlas of Historical County Boundaries*, which details in maps and texts all changes in the boundaries of U.S. counties from their origins; and the *Buildings of the United States*, a series of volumes comprising a publicly accessible inventory of American regional architecture.

Organizations and academic centers devoted to the study of particular regions have received NEH support through grants for individual projects and through institutional support for endowment or facilities. This support includes institutions with comprehensive programs of research, curriculum, and public programming about a region's history and culture: The Center for Arkansas and Regional Studies at the University of Arkansas, the Center for the Study of the Southwest at Southwest Texas State University, and the Mountain West Center for Regional Studies at Utah State University are but three such comprehensive centers that NEH has strengthened. NEH has also supported many institutions that are locally focused but regionally significant, institutions such as historical societies, libraries, museums, historic sites, and cultural centers. To take but one example, the Penn Community Center, on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, is a school and community center founded for the benefit of former African-American slaves on the sea islands off South Carolina. The Center served as a retreat where much of the strategy of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was outlined by figures like Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy, and Andrew Young. Today it remains the nation's only tangible institutional link with the Gullah culture of the Carolina Sea Islands.

More typically, NEH supports discrete projects that focus on some particular aspect of regionalism. The examples discussed below have engaged the interest and collaboration of scholars and citizens alike—from students and newly literate adults to experienced teachers and scholars, from community groups and business leaders to national and international visitors. Collectively, these examples represent only a small selection of regional projects funded by NEH, but they do suggest how the Endowment's support extends over a wide spectrum of approaches and topics crucial to understanding regional America.

Roots of Everyday Life

Many of the characteristics that make a place and its people distinctive are subtle traits of everyday life—the way people talk, the foods they eat, the way they behave and the beliefs they hold. These traits are not as visible as a landscape, not as tangible as a clay pot or a marble statue, but they are of crucial importance to a region's identity. Exploring beliefs, ideas, and customs, NEH-supported projects have gone to the heart of regional cultures. For example, in Washington, Oregon, Montana, and Idaho an NEH-supported series of call-in radio programs encouraged listeners to consider the distinctiveness of that region by reading, thinking about, and responding to the literature written about it. Also highlighting regional identity was a popular museum exhibition by the New Jersey Historical Society; called "Teen New Jersey," the exhibition used memorabilia donated by the public to illustrate the region's history from the 1940s and Frank Sinatra to the 1990s and Bruce Springsteen. Religious movements, too, have played important roles in nourishing the roots of everyday life in many regions of the country. In New England and other parts of the Northeast, some nineteen Shaker communities flourished in the eighteenth, ninteenth, and into the twentieth centuries. The Shakers' special ways of life and belief have been preserved and reenacted with NEH assistance at such sites as Hancock Shaker Village in Massachusetts and the Canterbury Shaker Village in New Hampshire.

Earning a Living

The legacy of work has helped define the contours of America's regional identity. Whether it be shipping and commerce in New England, plantation agriculture in the South, or mining and ranching in the West, patterns of economic activity have over time lent distinctiveness to regional cultures. Over the years, the Endowment has supported a variety of projects to help foster a deeper understanding of the relationship among work, place, and identity in American life. Among these is a cooperative microfilming project at Cornell University to preserve historical records that shed light on agricultural developments and changes in rural life from 1820 to 1945.

Other projects have focused on the economic forces that have transformed and in some cases eliminated entire industries and the ways of life they sustain, thus altering the distinctiveness of a region. For example, a consortium of school districts in West Virginia received a grant from the Endowment to develop an educational CD-ROM on the cultural and economic impact of coal mining in their region. Similarly, scholars and teachers at a community college in Dearborn, Michigan, are collecting the oral histories of retired auto industry workers. NEH is also supporting the efforts of the Kona Historical Society to tell the fascinating story of how immigrant laborers from Japan forged a unique way of life on the coffee farms of Hawaii. Through these projects and others, the Endowment works to preserve valuable records of the past and to expand and enrich our understanding of the complex relationship between work and place.

Landscapes and Cityscapes

From the tightly crested valleys of New England to the big-sky expanse of the Great Plains, from isolated ranches to crowded urban streets, physical places both found and made play a crucial role in shaping regional and national culture. Distinctive natural landscapes or humanly created cityscapes can tell us where we are, where we are going—and even what is disappearing. Geography affects history in profound ways, as the management of water resources in the West makes clear. And just as we associate certain speech patterns or food preferences with regions, so too do we recognize distinctive types of architecture: the adobe hacienda in Santa Fe, the craftsman cottage in Florida, and New York’s brownstones all embody the physical and cultural heritage of their regions.

NEH and the state humanities councils have supported explorations of cityscapes and landscapes from a variety of perspectives. A seminar supported by the Kansas Humanities Council, for example, entitled “Literature and Ecology on the Great Plains: Learning to Live on the Land,” combined literary, historical, and scientific perspectives to examine the experience of European settlers on the plains: the challenges of adapting agriculture to the plains environment; the problems of establishing communities within the limitations, both cultural and ecological, of place. Urban survival and community-building has its place as well: NEH supported the preservation of a crucial, historically significant collection of Jacob Riis photographs depicting squalid housing, sweatshops, bars, and streets characteristic of New York and other cities around the turn of the century.

Changing Places

Many NEH-supported projects reflect the importance of migration to understanding regional experience. For four centuries and from every part of the world, people have immigrated to America: Scandinavians to the upper Midwest, the Scots-Irish to Virginia and the Carolinas, and Chinese and Japanese peoples to Hawaii and the Pacific Coast. Elements of the French tradition still linger in Louisiana, while Spanish customs and the Spanish language remain important in the Southwest, in Florida, and in urban New York. The immigrant experience in eastern cities is the subject of NEH-supported exhibitions at New York's Lower East Side Tenement Museum, while both old and new immigrants' records can be found at the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota. Individual studies such as Charles H. Montgomery's research on the Spanish heritage in the Upper Rio Grande are probing the extent to which old cultures affect more recent ethnic groups.

Regional development has also affected and been affected by internal migration. American Indians were forced onto reservations in the Plains and the Southwest as the frontier steadily receded. When the Mormons were driven from the Midwest, they settled in the sparsely peopled territory of Utah in 1846. And beginning around the time of the first World War, African Americans left the South to seek new opportunities in northern cities—as the NEH-supported documentary *Goin to Chicago* vividly chronicles. The film looks at the period 1940-1970, affording insight into the historical forces at work and the impact of the migration on the evolving urban culture of Chicago. NEH has supported individual studies, such as Susan Gray's research into the ways missionary life on the Michigan frontier embodied a cultural collision of Native American and European families; NEH has also supported sweeping documentaries, such as Ken Burns and Stephen Ives' *The West*, which reveals the ways that vast territory provided escape and new hope, as well as new hardships, for large numbers of Americans.

Expressions of America

NEH support has helped Americans deepen their knowledge of the language, literature, art, and popular culture, knowledge that is vital to understanding a region's shared heritage, its conflicts, its people, and its place in the larger nation. Regional life manifests itself in speech, literature, music, storytelling, painting—in linguistic and artistic expression of all varieties. From the novels of southerner William Faulkner to the urban sounds of Motown to the landscapes of the Hudson River school, art informs regional identity and is informed by it. For example, a film funded by NEH, *American Tongues*, examines attitudes toward regional, social, and ethnic variations in American speech and how those attitudes reflect larger social issues. With NEH help the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, Mississippi, renovated part of a 1914 library into a modern museum to showcase the library's collections of artifacts, records, and memorabilia of Mississippi Delta's blues.

NEH has supported a wide range of scholarly studies that explore various modes of expression in the broad context of region, from John Seery's careful look at painter Grant Wood's images of the Midwest, to Sandra Ballard's study of writings by women in Appalachia, to Victoria Brehm's examination of North American Indian literatures in the Great Lakes region. Regional values are expressed in many forms, as David Waldstreicher shows in his NEH-supported study of how celebratory expressions (such as toasts and proclamations) reveal the ways regional self-identity profoundly influenced the nature of national identity in the early republic.

Places to Visit

When Americans travel, an increasing number visit places of cultural and historical significance where they can discover the stories of real people in real places. In 1998 more than 92 million Americans attended cultural events or activities when they traveled more than fifty miles from their homes. For decades NEH has provided major support to hundreds of institutions that are themselves "cultural tourism" destinations. Through its grant making, NEH enables historic and cultural sites to provide rich interpretations, vivid presentations, and innovative approaches to lifelong learning and public education.

The Endowment has funded historic sites, large and small, to provide rich interpretation for visitors. For example, the restored Moravian congregation town of Old Salem, North Carolina, portrays the town's daily life from 1766 to 1865 to over 170,000 visitors a year. This program includes the story of African Americans in Salem, with particular focus on the restoration of St. Philip's, the oldest African-American church in North Carolina and one of oldest in the South.

The D.C. Heritage Tourism Coalition, a network of over seventy neighborhood museums and cultural organizations in Washington, D.C., is becoming not only a cultural but also an economic force in the city's campaign to attract visitors off the National Mall and into the city's core. The Coalition plays an important role in Washington's strategic economic development planning by helping relatively small organizations present their authentic Washington stories, thereby strengthening the neighborhoods in which they exist. With Endowment help, through support for the Historical Society of Washington, D.C. and the Humanities Council of Washington, D.C., the Coalition transforms Washington neighborhoods into city museums.

The Blackstone River Valley of Massachusetts and Rhode Island, which has become a national heritage corridor, offers another example of a regional project that has spurred cultural tourism. Five visitor centers are being created within this nearly 400,000-acre area that was one of the early sites of the American industrial revolution. One of these centers is the Museum of Work and Culture in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. This museum includes a long-term collaborative exhibition on the history of the French Canadians of Woonsocket, offering a case study in ethnic adaptation.

Roads and Rivers

Europeans found America as they were looking for new trade routes from Europe to Asia. One of the central themes of U.S. history—that we are a nation on the move—is based on the reality of people traveling from someplace known to someplace imagined; across and along oceans, rivers, paths, trails, and roads. The humanities make us travelers of a different sort, transcending our own time and place through history, literature, and art. NEH has helped to guide that travel. The journals of the members of the Corps of Discovery, the great ninteenth-century inland expedition led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, take us up the Missouri River and across plains and mountains to the Northwest and the Pacific Ocean. These journals, the standard edition of which was supported by the NEH, open up for us the country's newly acquired Louisiana Purchase and its land, people, plants, and animals. The great appeal of National Humanities Medalist Stephen E. Ambrose's recent book, *Undaunted Courage*, indicates the continued power of this journey to capture the imagination.

Almost two centuries later, interstate highways have come to characterize the American landscape, reshaping the country's cities and countryside while revolutionizing access to its regions and the perceptions people have of them. A compelling and humorous NEH-funded documentary film, *Divided Highways: The Interstates and the Transformation of American Life*, tells the story of the high ideals and vision of those who planned the highways, the engineers who built them, and the way these roads have both divided and united Americans, changing forever the communities affected by them. NEH also supported research on the "national road," the first federally funded and planned highway (begun in 1808), one that forged critical links between East Coast cities and an emerging frontier west of the Appalachians.

Mapping Differences

America is made up of overlapping and dynamic regions that are in turn made up of diverse communities. From the beginning, a rich mix of cultures and races have interacted, facing conflicts and forging connections within regions and across borders. Today many longtime residents are tracing and reclaiming their family histories; at the same time, new immigrants may be seeking to put down roots and to retain their own cultural heritage. NEH has actively supported the study and documentation of such groups in various regions and borderlands and of their interaction and change over time.

The NEH-funded *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, for example, documents every aspect of the region's "life and thought—the individuals, places, ideas, rituals, symbols, myths, values, and experiences—which have sustained either the reality or the illusion of regional distinctiveness."[8] A "Southwest and Border Culture Institute" recently funded by NEH at New Mexico State University will explore how, in this multicultural state and region, American Indian, Hispanic, and Anglo cultures converge in the border Southwest. Under an NEH challenge grant to California State University at Long Beach, newer Americans contribute to the study of their languages and cultures by coming together in learning communities where English speakers work with native speakers of Spanish, Chinese, and Cambodian.

Recalling the Past

Over the years, NEH and its partners, the state humanities councils, have supported a host of projects with history at their core. Stories of peoples and events in the past provide concrete insights into how the character of America's regions developed, and the general public responds enthusiastically to these forays into the past. These stories help illuminate the ways in which a sense of a particular place is adopted or adapted by residents, while also revealing similarities and common characteristics across regions. As we contemplate the stories of people in particular places, we are led to think more deeply about their meaning in state, regional, and national contexts.

One NEH-funded project that examines regional differences in a historical context is the "Valley of the Shadow," a web-based research project that focuses on two Civil War-era communities**,** one in Pennsylvania and one in Virginia. The communities are close to each other in geography and climate, but far apart in politics and culture, divided by the War. This project's website contains a multiplicity of primary source materials through which teachers, students, scholars, and the general public can explore for themselves the history of these two communities during a wrenching period in the nation's history. Another example is the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, where four museums exhibit objects associated with the life of Buffalo Bill and the culture of the West from the early frontier period forward. The new South Carolina History Center created with the help of an NEH challenge grant will address storytelling in a different way, by providing exhibitions, educational programs, and publications that draw on its collection strengths in southern history from the colonial period through the twentieth century desegregation and Civil Rights movements.

REGIONAL INITIATIVES

Extensive as support for regionally oriented projects and topics has been at the National Endowment for the Humanities, there is always more to be done. The Endowment is actively seeking ways to further strengthen regional humanities programs, both for their intrinsic merit and for the enthusiastic interest they can elicit in all kinds of audiences. Through new initiatives focusing on region, we can bring the humanities "home" to more Americans.

One plan being considered is an Endowment-wide special initiative under the overarching theme of "Rediscovering America through Place and Region." Under such an initiative, NEH would encourage, in all its programs, proposals on topics of regional importance and appeal. Proposals for excellent projects that bring understanding of regions into schools or to broad public audiences would be especially welcome, as would new research that explores the nature of region and the role of regions in American life and history, or projects that promise to help identify and preserve resources of regional culture.

The rich variety of projects NEH has supported over the years leads, as innovative scholarship and interpretive programming always do, to more questions, more issues for fruitful humanities projects. What, for example, has been the effect on regional identity of international borders; how (and how much) does a region's culture become imbued with the non-U.S. cultures that lie outside official boundaries? Another example: Do we take sufficient account of a region's *internal* diversity when we seek to understand a region's distinctiveness? The effects of changing ethnic identity within regions are especially in need of examination as new immigrant populations exert their impact on and take their cues from the region in which they establish new homes. And there are always questions of the role of regionalism in American thought: how has regional identity been perceived? Discovered? Constructed? Idealized and denigrated? What are international perceptions of American regions, and how have such perceptions in turn affected our own sense of region?

Such questions are, of course, only suggestive of the range of possible issues regionally oriented scholarship and programming can address. NEH, in its regular grant programs, welcomes the full range of regional humanities possibilities. But beyond inviting worthy proposals to its current programs, the Endowment would also welcome the additional resources to focus programming more explicitly on regional projects. Ideas already abound: summer seminars for teachers that explore regional identity in each part of the country; special competitions for radio programming to bring regional expression into every home; exhibitions of regional art and culture that travel within and among regions; special categories of support to preserve artifacts and documents in small but precious archives; special challenge grants to encourage broader financial support for regionally and locally significant cultural institutions; grants to support researchers' travel to regional collections. With enhanced resources NEH stands ready to expand the possibilities for supporting humanities within and about America's regions.

With the help of public and private partnerships NEH is already undertaking two major initiatives to enrich our understanding of regions and to bring the humanities to more Americans.

Regional Humanities Centers

This initiative seeks to enhance institutional commitment to the study of regions and to the humanities by establishing ten regional humanities centers throughout the nation. These centers are to emphasize interdisciplinary learning in the humanities and new kinds of collaboration among humanities scholars and teachers, scholars and teachers in other disciplines, and the public. Through this initiative NEH seeks to provide venues for the exploration of a region's history, its people, its diverse cultural expressions, and its symbolic and physical environment. New technologies will facilitate these explorations, while also enabling the centers to provide points of comparison and connection with the wider world.

Regional humanities centers will foster these exciting explorations by serving as cultural hubs for the support of research on regional topics, the documentation and preservation of regional history and cultural resources, the development of undergraduate and master's level degree programs, collaboration with K-12 teachers and school systems, the design of programming to develop and engage public audiences, and the development of resources for cultural heritage tourism. New programs and resources will be developed to fill clearly defined needs in the humanities, complementing and coordinating—but not supplanting—the work of existing educational and cultural institutions. While each regional humanities center will have an administrative home in a single institution to ensure permanence, the reach of its public and educational activities could easily extend across state, regional, and even national boundaries.

Collaborative relationships between regional humanities centers and the state humanities councils will be crucial to the success of this initiative, as will cooperation with other educational and cultural institutions throughout the region. In addition, the centers will work together so that topics that reach beyond regional boundaries—the experiences of specific ethnic groups, the impact of climate, the influences of metropolitan centers, for example—can be examined in comparative ways. The centers will support programs that bring global perspectives to bear on the understanding of U.S. regions and that provide opportunities for humanities scholars and students from other nations to study regional America. By facilitating such comparative explorations of regional topics, the centers will engage the interest and collaboration of scholars and citizens alike—from students and newly literate adults to experienced teachers and scholars, from community groups and business leaders to national and international visitors.

Solely for purposes of this special initiative, the Endowment has identified ten "regions" in which humanities centers will be located:

Pacific: Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington, American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands
Southwest: Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas
Rocky Mountains: Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Utah, Wyoming
Plains: Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota
Upper Mississippi Valley: Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Wisconsin
Central: Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia
Deep South: Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee
South Atlantic: Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands
Mid-Atlantic: Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, District of Columbia
New England: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont

These groupings of states have been delineated for administrative purposes and are intended as a way to channel resources rather than to define regional cultures or characteristics. As discussion earlier in this paper makes clear, defining America's regions is inherently a problematic enterprise. For most humanities purposes the regions will have flexible and dynamic boundaries.

NEH's new initiative for Regional Humanities Centers will build on longstanding interest in regions, while also significantly enhancing and enriching regional study in a number of ways. First, the NEH initiative is national in breadth. The goal is a *network* of centers working not only within their own regions but also with each other across regional boundaries and with international audiences. Second, the NEH centers will stimulate cultural, educational, and scholarly activity by others. Collaboration among institutions, from museums, colleges, and universities to secondary schools to state humanities councils, will characterize the centers' activities. Third, NEH centers will involve the public in the humanities in ways only a very few academic centers do at present. Our initiative will tap regional interest—in place, in cultural heritage, in family—to bring the insights of the humanities to wide audiences. While solid scholarship and academic programs will undergird every center's activities, the NEH centers will reach out to broad public audiences through exciting programming, cultural heritage tourism, and programs for underserved constituencies.

Finally, the NEH goal is to strengthen regional studies nationwide, not supplant excellent work already being done. Many institutions that now have centers will be likely applicants for NEH support, but to succeed as NEH Regional Humanities Centers institutions must make a dramatic commitment to broadening their reach. They must be willing to grow, to enlarge the range of their vision, to find new partners both for funding and for programming

My History is America's History

Family history, made up of those most immediate stories of one's past, can and does play a crucial role in understanding the nature of America's regions. While the Regional Humanities Centers initiative seeks to enhance opportunities for regional study in the broadest sense, another NEH initiative, "My History is America's History" looks through the more personally focused lens of family history.

Americans can feel a deep personal connection to the past through their family's history. Illuminating the pathways that lead from personal family stories to broader narratives of community, regional, and national history is the purpose of the multiyear "My History" initiative. The program will help Americans preserve and share family histories and treasures, and will deepen their understanding of how their families fit into the rich, complex story of the nation.

"My History" will reach out to the millions of Americans who are already engaged in exploring the past. Studies show that people of all generations are interviewing their parents and grandparents, constructing family trees, reviewing family photographs, going to family reunions, or traveling back to the country or the town of their ancestors. The goal of the program is to offer models and specific strategies that enable people to broaden the framework within which they view their own and their families' stories. Participants will be able to see themselves and their families in the context of their communities, their regions, and the nation. The initiative will

- Give Americans of all ages useful tools to help them explore the past.
- Encourage all Americans to collect, document, preserve, and share their family stories, treasures, and heirlooms.
- Invigorate public interest in American history and help Americans understand the role of their own families in building the American nation.
- Make family histories available electronically as primary resources for scholars, educators, and the public.
- Broaden public support for historical societies, archives, libraries, and genealogical societies as stewards of our family, community, and national heritage.

Two educational and promotional projects—a family history kit and a website—form the foundation of the "My History" initiative. They will be presented to the public in the fall of 1999 as a millennium event. In the months following, Americans will share their stories and explore links to the nation's past through "My History" programs in schools, libraries, and community centers. Communities, states, and regions will be encouraged to plan and implement long-range strategies for collecting, preserving, and sharing family stories.

Family History Kit

Traces of family history are everywhere—a diary, an old vase, the memory of a conversation, even a statue in the town square. Weaving these threads together into a chronicle of the past is both a challenge and a labor of love. The "My History" kit is a tool box of resources that provides cues, strategies, and models designed to help any American discover more about his or her family stories. The kit includes advice on how to save a family's stories, from recording family memories to including family histories in school curricula. Also included are guidelines for conducting oral histories and basic advice on preserving everything from furniture to videotapes. Users of the kit will find case studies of Americans who have investigated their family histories and their family's connection to national eras and events. The kit will also offer lists of books and films that explore the relationship between personal histories and major historical movements and events, and it will contain a guide to organizations that offer resources for genealogy, oral history, and local, state, regional, and national histories.

Website

The "My History Is America's History" website is envisioned as the project's virtual "front porch"—a cyberplace where anyone can drop by to exchange stories with relatives, neighbors, or people from across the country. The website opens new possibilities for preserving and sharing family history and exploring the nation's past—through words, images, links, and searchable databases on the World Wide Web. The Learning Company's Banner Blue Division (formerly Brøderbund Software) is making a significant contribution to the project by building the website. Visitors to this "My History" website will be able to access an online version of the kit, redesigned to exploit the powers of the Internet and flexible enough to be expanded, altered, and improved over time. Visitors will be able to enter stories they have collected about their families. Selected stories will be posted online; all will be preserved in a database that will be available for scholarship and educational purposes. A timeline will enable visitors to find connections between family histories and the nation's history; users will also be able to consult encyclopedia accounts of historical events and movements and to explore links to a rich array of humanities sites through a powerful search engine.

"My History is America's History" will offer all Americans a way to begin exploring family history and to see where their personal stories fit into the narrative of the nation's past. The project's appeal is personal, but its scope and audience are regional and national.

CONCLUSION

Through its tradition of support for regional studies, through newly developed and still-to-be planned initiatives, the National Endowment for the Humanities seeks to help us all rediscover America through the humanities. Issues of definition, of methodology, of significance—a few of which were touched on in the first part of this paper—will always remain and will require thought, study, and reasoned debate. In the *New York Times* article mentioned earlier, Peter Applebome writes, "amid this celebration of regional distinctiveness, a nagging question persists: are there still distinctive regions to celebrate?"[9] NEH does not seek to "celebrate regional distinctiveness" but rather to celebrate *asking* that persistent "nagging question." NEH affirms no one approach to place and region; we only affirm that understanding where we are matters to who we are, and that the humanities are vital to achieving that understanding.

Members of the Working Group

Steve Ross, Chairman
Jane Aikin
Ralph Canevali
Michael Lanza
Clay Lewis
Kathleen Mitchell
Nancy Sturm
Jeff Thomas
Kathy Toavs
Patti Van Tuyl
Laura Word

ENDNOTES

---

[1] See William Leach, *Country of Exiles: The Destruction of Place in American Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999) for a current and provocative commentary on the need of Americans for a concrete sense of place in the face of what Leach calls "the landscape of the temporary."

[2] Frederic G. Cassidy, Chief Editor, introduction to *Dictionary of American Regional English*, vol. I (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985), xvi.

[3] Edward Ayers and Peter S. Onuf, introduction to *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions*, by Edward Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter S. Onuf (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 8.

[4] Mark Crispin Miller, quoted in Peter Applebome, "Out from Under the Nation's Shadow," *New York Times,* 20 February 1999, p. A17, col. 1.

[5] Peter Applebome, "Out from Under the Nation's Shadow," *New York Times,* 20 February 1999, p. A15, col. 2.

[6] Constance Rourke, for example, urged artists and critics to attend to regional "customs, folklore, and native speech" as "a means of understanding … our apparently standardized but deeply divided and enigmatic life." "The Significance of Sections," *The New Republic*, 20 September 1933, 149, quoted in John L. Thomas, "The Uses of Catastrophism: Lewis Mumford, Vernon L. Parrington, Van Wyck Brooks, and the End of American Regionalism," *American Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 2 (June 1990), 224.

[7] Although this working paper is limited in focus to regional America, the recognition that region and place are fundamental perspectives of the humanities applies as well to global history and culture. A sense of region, in the form of commitment to specific localities, can be seen as a central leitmotif of world history—sometimes, as we all know, played out with violent results.

[8] Charles Reagan Wilson and William R. Ferris, eds., introduction to *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), xvi.

[9] "Out from Under the Nation's Shadow," *New York Times,* 20 February 1999, p. A15, col. 2.