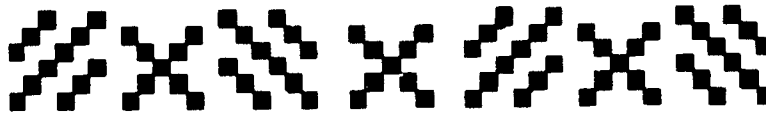


The Manuscript Federal Census: Source for a "New" Local History

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Within recent years a number of scholars have begun to decry the tendency of historians to write American social history from the perspective of the dominant culture. As one of these critics notes, historians in the past have usually focused their attention "on unions rather than on laborers, on social welfare rather than on the experience of the poor, on institutions rather than on the people they purported to serve."¹ This historical myopia has left largely unexamined the experiences of sizeable segments of the population. The result is that "the United States, insofar as major aspects of its past are concerned, remains an unknown country."²

Several historians have initiated attempts to "redress the historical balance in order to provide a total picture of society."³ One leading advocate of such endeavors has called for a description of past societies "as they appeared from the bottom rather than the top, more from the point of view of the inarticulate than of the articulate."⁴ Such urgings have

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¹ Tamara K. Hareven, ed., *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1971), viii. A similar point is made by Robert H. Bremner, "The State of Social Welfare History," in Herbert J. Bass, ed., *The State of American History* (Chicago, 1970), 94.

² Norman Birnbaum, "Afterword," in Stephan Thernstrom and Richard Sennett, eds., *Nineteenth-Century Cities: Essays in the New Urban History* (New Haven, 1969), 422.

³ Hareven, ed., *Anonymous Americans*, x.

⁴ Jesse Lemisch, "The American Revolution Seen from the Bottom Up," in Barton J. Bernstein, ed., *Towards A New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York, 1968), 6.

begun to broaden the scope of American social history. To date, however, this "new" social history has been concerned primarily with the urban scene.⁵ Attempts to write the history of "anonymous" Americans have not yet had a major impact on local history. "Very much unstudied by historians," observes one writer, "are places too small even to fit the census taker's minimum definition of urbanism, but populated nonetheless by inhabitants whose pursuits were mainly non-agricultural or only indirectly agricultural."⁶ The same is true, of course, for areas entirely agrarian.

These omissions are unfortunate since efforts to understand the experiences of the "inarticulate" common man are highly compatible with studies of small, well defined geographical areas. Almost sixty years ago a contributor to an Indiana county history opined that "the history that lies at the root of all history is that which affects the local life, the homes and the daily conditions of the people."⁷ More recently, a scholar associated with the National Archives has observed that those who are impatient with local history fail to realize that "the parochial is not without broader meaning and that the well-told story of a township reveals much also about the history of the county of which it is a part."⁸ Considerable work remains to be done at the village, township, and county levels before integrated state and national social histories can be written. This work, moreover, must now take cognizance of those groups at the bottom of the societal ladder which have been neglected so often in the past.

⁵ See, for example, Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964); Thernstrom and Sennett, eds., *Nineteenth-Century Cities*; Peter R. Knights, *The Plain People of Boston, 1830-1860* (New York, 1971); two essays by Richard J. Hopkins, "Occupational and Geographic Mobility in Atlanta, 1870-1896," *Journal of Southern History*, XXXIV (May, 1968), 200-13, and "Status, Mobility, and the Dimensions of Change in a Southern City: Atlanta, 1870-1910," in Kenneth T. Jackson and Stanley K. Schultz, eds., *Cities in American History* (New York, 1972), 216-31; and Paul B. Worthman, "Working Class Mobility in Birmingham, Alabama, 1880-1914," in Hareven, ed., *Anonymous Americans*, 172-213.

⁶ Rodney O. Davis, "Prairie Emporium: Clarence, Iowa, 1860-1880. A Study of Population Trends," *Mid-America*, LI (April, 1969), 131.

⁷ Benjamin S. Parker, "The Importance of Local History and the Best Methods of Preserving It," in Rolland Lewis Whitson, ed., *Centennial History of Grant County, Indiana* (2 vols., Chicago, 1914), I, 33.

⁸ Jane F. Smith, "The Use of Federal Records in Writing Local History: A Case Study," *Prologue: The Journal of the National Archives*, I (Spring, 1969), 51.

A need to reexamine and revitalize the writing of Indiana's local history should be obvious to anyone acquainted with the extant literature. Many Indiana county histories are old, written in the last third of the nineteenth century or in the years surrounding the 1916 centennial. Most are heavily biographical (separate biographical sections and indexes are not unusual), but the biographies are normally of the local elite and not of the common laborer or small farmer. Moreover, many local histories, particularly the most recent ones, are flawed by the inclusion of myriad lists (survey data, governmental officials, population figures, etc.) and the absence of careful analysis.⁹ "History is drab," says the author of a recent Indiana county history.¹⁰ That fact alone should indicate the need for applying new techniques to the writing of local history.

One such technique is the utilization of previously neglected sources. Newspapers and local manuscript collections (normally left by the well educated or well-to-do) are, of course, important historical documents. They should not, however, be used to the exclusion of other valuable materials. As Stephan Thernstrom notes, social history has "depended excessively on evidence which was at one remove from the daily lives of individuals."¹¹ A source which Thernstrom and others have employed to help correct this imbalance—the manuscript federal census—is of particular value to persons interested in local history.

The term "manuscript census" refers to the forms (called "schedules") that were completed by the census enumerators as they made their rounds. The published census volumes were compiled from the information collected on these forms. These schedules are not rendered worthless, however, simply

⁹ An addiction to listing is exhibited by Alves John Kreitzer, *A History of Northeast Dubois County* (Dubois, Ind., 1970); Frank S. Campbell, *The Story of Hamilton County, Indiana* (Noblesville, Ind., 1962); and *A History of Warren County, Indiana* (n.p., 1966). Kenneth P. McCutchan, *From Then Til Now: History of McCutchanville* (Indianapolis, 1969), and Marian McFadden, *Biography of a Town: Shelbyville, Indiana, 1822-1962* (Shelbyville, Ind., 1968) do not rely as heavily on lists, but neither do they provide much rigorous analysis of the structure and development of their respective communities.

¹⁰ Kreitzer, *A History of Northeast Dubois County*, iv.

¹¹ Stephan Thernstrom, "Quantitative Methods in History: Some Notes," in Seymour Martin Lipset and Richard Hofstadter, eds., *Sociology and History: Methods* (New York, 1968), 71.

because the decennial enumerations of which they were a part have long since been completed. The manuscript census provides a wealth of information for the contemporary student of local history. That this is true has long been recognized by at least a few historians. In a prescient article early in this century Joseph A. Hill called attention to the fact that the published census reports had "by no means extracted everything of value to be derived from . . . [the census] schedules."¹² Barnes Lathrop concurred in 1948 when he described the unprinted census records as "a great neglected source."¹³

Prior to 1850 the federal censuses were little more than the crude enumeration of population which was mandated by the Constitution. The basic unit in the compilation of the census was the family, and only the household head was actually listed by name. Beginning in 1850, however, the *individual* became the object of enumeration. Each person (with the exception of slaves) was recorded by name on a separate line of the schedule. It is the detailed information regarding individuals that makes the manuscript census such a valuable aid. Unfortunately, the 1890 schedules were almost entirely destroyed by fire, and the 1900 and subsequent returns are still closed to scholarly use by law. Thus, the following discussion is primarily confined to the manuscript censuses of population for the years 1850-1880.¹⁴

Although there are slight variations, the information on the population schedules is essentially the same for the four

¹² Joseph A. Hill, "The Historical Value of the Census Records," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1908* (2 vols., Washington, 1909), I, 204.

¹³ Barnes F. Lathrop, "History from the Census Returns," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LI (April, 1948), 293.

¹⁴ General information regarding the history and development of the census may be found in Roland P. Falkner, "The Development of the Census," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, XII (July-December, 1898), 358-86; W. Stull Holt, *The Bureau of the Census: Its History, Activities and Organization* (Institute for Government Research, Service Monographs of the United States Government No. 53; Washington, 1929); Hyman Alterman, *Counting People: The Census in History* (New York, 1969); and Ann Herbert Scott, *Census, U.S.A.: Fact Finding for the American People, 1790-1970* (New York, 1968). While this paper deals with only the population schedules, it should be noted that other schedules—particularly those dealing with agriculture and manufacturing—are no less valuable for the historian. Lathrop, "History from the Census Returns," 296-99, provides miniature reproductions of all six 1850 schedules.

SCHEDULE 1—Free Inhabitants in *Second Ward* in the County of *Marion* of *Indiana* enumerated by me, on the *20* day of *June* 1860. *H. S. Adams* Ass Post Office *Indianapolis*

No. of Inhabitant	Name	Sex	Age	Color	Profession, Occupation, or Trade of such persons, male and female, over 15 years of age.	Value of Estate Owned		Place of Birth, Naming the State, Territory, or Country.	Married to a Slave	No. of Children	No. of Inhabitants in Family
						Real Estate	Personal Estate				
664	James R. Brewster	M	44	W	Editor		25	Ind			
	Ravi B. Brewster	M	23	W	Clk		75	Ind			
665	Caliza Vahl	F	58	F			100	Prussia			
	John	M	17	W	Clk		75	Ind			
	Bartha	F	11	F			75				
664	Joseph Swanson	M	44	W							
665	Sam. Goldberry	M	24	W	Salesman		50				
666	Walter Bingham	M	25	W	Smelter		1000	Ind			
	Sarah	F	24	F				Ind			
	Mary	F	3	F				Ind			
	Geo. W.	M	1	W							
	Aliza Fletcher	F	18	F	Servant						
667	Sam. J. Reed	M	43	W	Wagon		200	Ind			
	Charles	M	23	W	Clk		2000	Ind			
	Howard	M	18	W							
	Catherine C.	F	40	F							
	Mary Bergher	F	24	F	Servant						
668	Chas. Dummer	M	30	W	Book		1000	Germany			
	John J. Donaghy	M	24	W	Physician		5000	Ind			
	Alonzo W.	M	22	F			6000				
	Sophia E.	F	3	F				Ind			
	Ann Callag.	F	26	F	Servant			Ireland			
669	Joseph Hough	M	29	W	Bank Teller		2000	Ind			
	John Kilgusier	M	19	W	Clk			Germany			
	Frank	M	14	W	Book						
670	Harmon Burke	M	22	W	Carrier		225	Ind			
	Kenneth Bann	M	21	W	Clk		25	Ind			
	Jim. Shalinger	M	20	W				Ind			
	Deak. J. Stone	M	20	W				Ind			
671	John W. Murphy	M	31	W	Iron Merchant		900	Ind			
	Ann	F	17	F				Ind			
	James	M	25	F	Servant			Germany			
672	John H. Hickey	M	24	W	Iron Merchant		1000	Va			
	John R.	M	21	F							
	John R.	M	2	W				Ind			
	Silas	M	14	F							
	James Reed	M	21	F	Servant			Ireland			
673	Unaccompanied										
674	John R. B.	M	26	W	Laborer		20	Ireland			
	Mary R.	F	24	F			11				

MANUSCRIPT CENSUS SCHEDULE

Reproduced from U. S., Eighth Census, 1860, population schedules for Marion County, Indiana (National Archives Microfilm Publication No. 653, roll 279).

decennial censuses under consideration. A listing of the information requested on the 1860 schedule provides some idea of the wealth of historical data which may be gleaned from the manuscript censuses for this period:

1. Name
2. Age
3. Sex
4. Color (white, black, or mulatto)
5. Profession, occupation, or trade (for those over fifteen years of age)
6. Value of real property
7. Value of personal property
8. Place of birth (state, territory, or country)
9. Whether married within the year
10. Whether attended school within the year
11. Persons over twenty years of age who cannot read or write
12. Whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, pauper, or convict.¹⁵

The possibilities for the use of this information are vast, and the suggestions which follow are in no sense exhaustive. As Lathrop comments, "the number of potential correlations within and between censuses is astronomical, [and] no one commentator can pretend to list all the varieties of meritorious census projects."¹⁶

At the most basic level the manuscript census can be used to develop a statistical sketch of a community. For example, it is possible to determine with considerable precision what percentage of a village or township population was white or black, native born or foreign born, under thirty or over thirty, and so on. The percentage of the adult population owning real

¹⁵ Specific information regarding questions asked on the various schedules and instructions to the census enumerators may be found in Carroll D. Wright and William C. Hunt, *The History and Growth of the United States Census* (U.S. Serial Set No. 3856; Washington, 1900). The 1850 and 1860 population schedules are identical except that the former does not include the question regarding personal property. The 1870 schedule requests information regarding nativity of parents (foreign or native born) and divides the literacy question into two sections—"cannot read" and "cannot write." The 1880 schedule omits the questions on property valuation. It adds a column calling for the relationship of each person in the family to the head of the family and also includes questions concerning civil condition (i.e. marital status), unemployment, health, and parents' place of birth.

¹⁶ Lathrop, "History from the Census Returns," 307.

property and the average value of that property can be computed. Analysis of nativity information will provide answers regarding the origins of a community's population. The questions dealing with the ability to read and write may be useful in determining literacy rates.¹⁷ Drawing up such a statistical sketch, as one eminent historian has observed, releases the local historian "from the domination of literary evidence" and provides him with "a number of useful reference points by which he . . . [can] orient his narrative."¹⁸

Use of the manuscript census can help to reveal relationships masked by the aggregation of census data. For example, the printed census may show that the foreign born comprised twenty per cent of a community's population. An individual doing a political study may therefore conclude that foreigners could exert only minimal political pressure. But analysis of manuscript census information may indicate that the foreign born constituted forty per cent of the adult males (the only group affecting nineteenth century political life). In this case the use of manuscript census data highlights political strength that might otherwise have remained hidden.¹⁹

By combining plat maps and information from the manuscript census, it is possible to prepare large scale historical maps of rural areas. Plat maps alone simply portray land parcels on the basis of legal ownership. Tracing the wanderings of the census enumerator in a given township, however, permits a view of the area in terms of farm management units. This procedure not only allows economic data to be mapped at the farm level but also makes it possible to produce visual representations of geographical change over time.²⁰

¹⁷ Regarding literacy studies see Harvey J. Graff, "Notes on Methods for Studying Literacy from the Manuscript Census," *Historical Methods Newsletter*, V (December, 1971), 11-16.

¹⁸ Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), 174. This citation is from a very valuable appendix to Warner's volume entitled "A Local Historian's Guide to Social Statistics" (pages 169-78). In a slightly revised and abbreviated form this appendix has been reprinted as Technical Leaflet 7 by the American Association for State and Local History. It is available at nominal cost by writing the AASLH, 1315 Eighth Avenue, South, Nashville, Tennessee 37203.

¹⁹ This is one of several uses of the manuscript census discussed by George A. Boeck, "A Historical Note on the Uses of Census Returns," *Mid-America*, XLIV (January, 1962), 46-50.

²⁰ For a more detailed discussion of these procedures see Michael P.

Investigation of social mobility in a given area is also facilitated by manuscript census use. An individual may be listed in the 1860 census as a common laborer owning no real or personal property. In the 1870 census, however, he may be listed as a carpenter with \$1,000 real and \$300 personal property. By itself this information may be of little value. But if such patterns recur among many of those who remained in the community for a decade (or a random sample thereof), some conclusions may be drawn regarding the opportunities for advancement in that particular locality.²¹

The manuscript census also allows researchers to investigate geographic mobility in a given area. This is a subject local historians have almost totally ignored in the past. If the decennial census figures show that a town gained 500 people in a ten year span, the assumption is often made that births and in-migrants must have totalled 500. It is also possible, however, that 5,500 people moved in or were born and 5,000 moved out or died. The net result would be the same, but the effect on the town would certainly be different. In attempts to analyze community life and development, population growth is not necessarily as important as population turnover. By tracing individuals from one census to the next, it is possible to estimate the magnitude of the turnover and to analyze a community's population stability. Moreover, by examining the socioeconomic characteristics (age, occupation, wealth, family size, etc.) of those who migrated and those who remained, it is possible to posit which factors had the greatest influence on geographic mobility and persistence.²²

Conzen, "Spatial Data From Nineteenth Century Manuscript Censuses: A Technique for Rural Settlement and Land Use Analysis," *Professional Geographer*, XXI (September, 1969), 337-43. Conzen employs both population and agricultural schedules.

²¹ The historical study of social mobility is a considerably more complex problem than this rather facile example might lead the reader to believe. See, for example, Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress*; Stuart Blumin, "Mobility and Change in Ante-Bellum Philadelphia," in Thernstrom and Sennett, eds., *Nineteenth-Century Cities*, 165-208; Stephan Thernstrom, "Immigrants and WASPs: Ethnic Differences in Occupational Mobility in Boston, 1890-1940," *ibid.*, 125-64; and Worthman, "Working Class Mobility in Birmingham, Alabama, 1880-1914."

²² Stephan Thernstrom and Peter R. Knights, "Men in Motion: Some Data and Speculations about Urban Population Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, I (Autumn, 1970), 7-35. This essay also appears in Hareven, ed., *Anonymous Americans*, 17-47. See also Knights, *The Plain People of Boston*, especially

As the above paragraphs should make clear, the manuscript census provides a wealth of historical data that is susceptible of many uses. But the census also commends itself to the local historian by virtue of its accessibility. The population schedules have been microfilmed by the National Archives and may be purchased at very moderate cost. Since microfilm readers are becoming increasingly available in public libraries and high schools, use of the manuscript census is rendered feasible even for the individual who is not able to undertake research outside his local community.²³

It should not be supposed, however, that the manuscript census constitutes a "supersource" which the historian can use indiscriminately. Census schedules, like other historical sources, must be utilized with caution and an awareness of their limitations.²⁴ It should be recognized at the outset that the census rarely achieved the complete enumeration of population that was one of its primary goals. Human error on the part of the census takers and occasional perversity on the part of the population conspired against total accuracy.

pages 48-77; Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress*, 84-90; and Howard P. Chudacoff, *Mobile Americans: Residential and Social Mobility in Omaha, 1880-1920* (New York, 1972), especially pages 35-60.

²³ *Federal Population Censuses, 1790-1890: A Catalogue of Microfilm Copies of the Schedules* (National Archives Publication No. 71-3; Washington, 1971). This booklet lists the microfilmed schedules available from the National Archives and provides information regarding ordering procedure. A single roll of microfilm costs from \$6.00 to \$9.00. For the 1850 through 1870 censuses one roll frequently contains all the schedules for two or three Indiana counties. For the 1880 census two rolls of microfilm are often required to cover all the schedules of a given county. W. Neil Franklin, comp., *Federal Population and Mortality Census Schedules, 1790-1890, in the National Archives and the States: Outline of a Lecture on Their Availability, Content, and Use* (National Archives, Special List No. 24; Washington, 1971), provides information regarding the availability of population and mortality schedules in each state. Pages 23-26 indicate that thirty-seven Indiana libraries hold at least some manuscript census material. It is probable that this list underestimates current holdings since it was compiled on the basis of microfilm publication sales through May, 1969, and questionnaires sent by the National Archives to selected depositories. Indiana University Library (Bloomington), for example, currently holds more manuscript census material than this booklet suggests. Both publications are available from the Publications Sales Branch (NATS), National Archives (GSA), Washington, D.C. 20408.

²⁴ Census imperfections are considered at length in *The Federal Census: Critical Essays* (Publications of the American Economic Association, New Series, No. 2; March, 1899). Unfortunately, this critique deals primarily with the no longer extant 1890 census. Wright and Hunt, *The History and Growth of the United States Census*, and Lathrop, "History from the Census Returns," 304-305, contain some discussion of census shortcomings.

For example, individuals living in corner houses in cities or towns could easily be overlooked if coordination among the enumerators was poor. Moreover, those individuals moving during the census from an unenumerated area to one already canvassed might not have been recorded.²⁵

Another important source of error resulted from the disinclination of some citizens to cooperate. An Indianapolis newspaper noted the problem during the summer of 1870:

A great deal of difficulty has been experienced by the Assistant Marshals appointed for the purpose of taking the ninth census, owing to the fact that a great part of the population of different counties are very reticent, and reserve information needed and asked for by the Marshals, under the impression that it will be used for the purpose of making out the tax-list, or for other purposes about which the American citizen is naturally sensitive.

In an effort to assuage these fears, the newspaper printed a detailed list of the census takers' instructions—especially those portions stressing the confidentiality of census information.²⁶ The effectiveness of this attempted placation was apparently rather minimal since the original 1870 manufacturing returns for Indianapolis were so defective that a recount was conducted.²⁷

Thus, the fact that an individual was enumerated did not preclude the recording of inaccurate personal data for that respondent. Ambiguities may be discovered even in questions so seemingly straightforward as those regarding age.²⁸ And, as illustrated, fear of the tax collector may sometimes have affected responses dealing with property valuation. In consequence, a healthy respect for the vagaries of human nature is essential for the individual embarking on serious census study.

Although these caveats must be taken into consideration, they do not negate the value of the manuscript census. Imperfect though it may be, it remains one of the richest

²⁵ Peter R. Knights, "A Method for Estimating Census Under-Enumeration," *Historical Methods Newsletter*, III (December, 1969), 5-8.

²⁶ *Indianapolis Journal* (daily), June 16, 1870.

²⁷ U. S., *Ninth Census, 1870*. Vol. III, *The Statistics of the Wealth and Industry of the United States* (Washington, 1872), 374, 378.

²⁸ Peter R. Knights, "Accuracy of Age Reporting in the Manuscript Federal Censuses of 1850 and 1860," *Historical Methods Newsletter*, IV (June, 1971), 79-83.

sources for the student of nineteenth century America. As historians become increasingly interested in the "anonymous" and "inarticulate" members of society, the manuscript census will become a more integral part of their research designs. Few sources, as Lathrop notes, "give so abiding an impression of the overwhelming weight of plain people in American society."²⁹

To date, Indiana's local historians have largely neglected the manuscript census. One example of this neglect is Kenneth P. McCutchan's *From Then Til Now: History of McCutchanville*, co-published by the Indiana Historical Society and the McCutchanville Community Association. Although McCutchan's work was termed a "model" small town history by one reviewer,³⁰ his narrative leaves the reader with little sense of where the community's population came from subsequent to the original settlement, what the people did for a living, and whether or not they were rich or poor. The word "population" does not appear in the index. Use of the manuscript census would not entirely solve these problems, but it might meliorate them. A cursory examination of the 1870 and 1880 schedules for Center Township, Vanderburgh County (wherein McCutchanville is located), reveals that numerous individuals listed in McCutchan's index also appear on the schedules. Thus, at the least, additional biographical information could be obtained. Moreover, it appears that Center Township had a fairly visible black population, a fact not clearly evidenced by the book. Finally, it might be of some interest that the 1870 census enumerator for Center Township was one R. P. McCutchan.³¹ Admittedly there are problems in situations of this kind. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to isolate the town completely from the surrounding township when the schedules do not make that distinction. This does not, however, automatically make the manuscript census valueless.

A notable exception to the statement that Indiana's local historians have ignored the manuscript census is pro-

²⁹ Lathrop, "History from the Census Returns," 312.

³⁰ The review, by Orville J. Jaebker, appeared in the *Indiana Magazine of History*, LXVI (June, 1970), 173-74.

³¹ U. S., Ninth Census, 1870, population schedules for Vanderburgh County, Indiana. These schedules are contained in National Archives Microfilm Publication No. 593, roll 364.

vided by Harold L. O'Donnell's two studies of Vermillion County.³² The author evinces an awareness both of the value of the census and the problems involved in its use. In addition, he includes at the end of each volume an alphabetized reprint of the name, age, occupation, and birthplace of all residents of his townships as they appear on the 1840-1880 census schedules. This is certain to be a useful aid to anyone following O'Donnell's historical footsteps, and he is to be commended for making this information so readily available.

It is to be hoped that other local historians will follow O'Donnell's example and will continue to exploit this valuable resource as they examine the nature of nineteenth century society in their own communities. Historical horizons have been broadened in recent years with the advent of the "new" social, economic, and urban history. If fresh techniques and sources (such as use of the manuscript census) begin to be employed by a greater number of those attempting to tell the stories of villages, townships, and counties, perhaps the historical vanguard may acquire another member—the "new" local history.

³² Harold L. O'Donnell, *Eugene Township (Vermillion County, Indiana): The First 100 Years, 1824-1924* (Danville, Ill., 1963); and Harold L. O'Donnell, *Newport and Vermillion Township: The First 100 Years, 1824-1924* (Danville, Ill., 1969).