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The Interview of Elliot Warren

Elliot Warren 00:00

I am looking at local governments and the leaders who comprised them, and arguing that the way they both managed their communities and the way that they managed up as in their relationships to state and federal officers are instrumental in the development of America's political economy, and that you can't understand how our political economy developed in a way that supported capitalism, just through [Alexander] Hamilton and just through federal leaders.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:29

[Intro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is a podcast by the Massachusetts Historical Society. It introduces listeners to our community of researchers. We learn about the paths they took to become a student of the past and the projects they are working on at the MHS. I am Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai, the Director of Research at the MHS, and today, we are sitting down with Elliot Warren, a PhD candidate at the College of William and Mary, and a recipient of both the Andrew W. Mellon short term fellowship from the MHS and support from the New England Regional Fellowship Consortium [NERFC], which is administered by the MHS. I had an undergraduate professor who would tell his students that research is 'mesearch' that is, you ask questions of the past that you want to know about yourself or your time period. And that certainly motivated my own interest in history. I was interested in history before I went to college, but this sort of made sense, and it continued to motivate me. So, what do you think of that is research, 'mesearch' for you?

Elliot Warren 01:45

So, I do think that research is 'mesearch' just because of the fact that, you know, every time you try, or at least for me, I try to go and look for topics that don't necessarily click right away. But, you know, I try to like reason my way into, if that makes sense. I maybe see a hole in the historiography, but if it just doesn't engage you, and it doesn't capture your interest, you're not going to be able to do anything effective with that, no matter how clearly you might be able to see a research project. If it doesn't draw you in, it's, I mean, it's a slog going through so many sources. You just can't do it if you're not passionate.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:19

Absolutely. I mean, it will this is a project that you will live with for many, many years, and it will be draining, and you will not enjoy it, and you will not produce good work if you are not invested in it. Have you always found history to be fun?

Elliot Warren 02:33

Oh, god, yeah. So, this is one of those, I feel almost cringy saying this, and it was one of those things that when I was applying to graduate school, it's the you know, you better do not put this in your personal statement, but I've loved history since I was very young. My parents still tease me about how I would refuse to be read fiction before I could read. I would exclusively ask to be read like nonfiction books, and then they found a happy medium with The Magic Treehouse series. I'm not sure if you're familiar, but...

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:00

Tell our listeners about it.

Elliot Warren 03:01

Yeah, so The Magic Tree House series is great, especially, you know, if you have kids who are, you want to maybe subtly steer them towards the historical interests. I think there's something like 50 books, and it's about these two kids that have a magic tree house that transports them throughout history. And every book is centered around a different historical event or theme. I some of them, I think, got into a little bit of the fantasy. But, you know, there was one on Pompeii, one on the Titanic. I was a Titanic kid. I've heard a lot of people in my generation joke that, you know, you were either a Titanic kid, a pyramids kid, or a Pompeii kid, or maybe dinosaurs. But so, yeah, I was always into history. Shamefully now, you know, watching the History Channel growing up and public school really captured my attention actually. I had this exposure through Magic Treehouse and through kind of just getting my parents to read me things, and then I started reading things on my own. But then in elementary school, when I had my first true history class, it was like, click, immediately.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:57

Where'd you grow up?

Elliot Warren 03:58

New Jersey. So very fortunate to have great public schools there and my teachers, I can actually pinpoint the exact moment in fifth grade learning about Ethan Allen and the attack on Fort Ticonderoga and I was just the story of it was so compelling. And from that moment on, early America was specifically the Revolution, really my passion. I was so fascinated by it. And then in middle school, I had another teacher, Cheryl Metz. She was my fifth-grade teacher. She's great and Anne Hannah, my sixth and seventh grade history teacher, where I kind of expanded, you know, outside of America, at that point, I learned about the French Revolution, and we did simulations in those classes. I don't know if people are familiar, but it's, it's a pedagogical tool of having people role play historical events, and everybody gets a role. I was the Duke d'Orleans in the French Revolution, but it's a good way of making it feel personal and making it feel relevant. And I think that's why history ended up being so meaningful to me is because I had teachers that really made it feel it important. It didn't just feel like things that happened in the past. It felt like things that still echo today.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 05:06

Now New Jersey, of course, has a long history, going back to the Revolution and beyond it was well, but was any local history part of this interest of yours?

Elliot Warren 05:13

Yeah, it's actually really funny because I think my county is trying to rewrite their history a little bit. So, I'm from Monmouth County. Battle of Monmouth famously took place there, and growing up, they're very proud of that. We've got a classic 'George Washington slept here house' in several towns. However, in early research, I found Monmouth County did have a Declaration of Dependence during the Revolution and was also the last county in New Jersey to free all of their enslaved people in the 19th century. So, my county's actually been a little bit on the a little bit behind, I would say, compared to the rest of the state. But there is a great deal of local history. There's the famous I'm going to botch the story, because I don't remember all of it, but the execution of [Joshua] Huddy was his last name. I can't remember, was Captain or Colonel. It was a patriot, I believe, that was hanged by the British in Monmouth County and Washington came very close to hanging some a British prisoner in retaliation. But he decided that would not escalation might not be the best there. So maybe I think we need a fact checker on that. But there are these little local historical sites, and one last one is my high school actually was right by the oldest continuously operating lighthouse in the country, Sandy Hook lighthouse in 1763, I believe.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:32

So, you started with the Titanic. You explored the French Revolution. You've learned a lot about different historical periods and characters, but you seem to come back to the Revolutionary period.

Elliot Warren 06:42

Yeah. I think because it's there's just there's so much there. And every time my understanding of history changes, it only deepens my interest in that period. So public school, you know, I don't want to say it focuses on the great men theory, but it is very much top-down history. You know, it's very much, you're going from one event to the next. It's very cause and effect. And so, I entered undergraduate, my undergraduate studies, with that kind of understanding of history. I think that it is kind of just these big events. And when I was disabused of that, it didn't make the period any less interesting. It just made it more interesting because you realize how much more was happening beyond the battles, beyond Continental Congress, beyond all these big, big issues that we talk about in K to 12 education mostly. You know, I think some people have the idea that when you you know we're trying to, I don't think correct to the record is necessarily the right term, but we're trying to be more honest today, right about the framers, about Washington, about Jefferson, and I think there's some people who think that makes the period less interesting, or, you know, less exciting to study. If we have that, I don't know, shadow over the major figures, but for me, it's the opposite, because that just means there's so much more going on there. There's so many more people's stories that can be told.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 08:03

Complicating the past should not dissuade people from studying it. It should be more attractive.

Elliot Warren 08:09

Yeah, exactly.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 08:11

Humanizes them.

Elliot Warren 08:12

Yeah, it does. I mean, one of the things I tell my classes when I teach is that because I teach stuff about the Age of Revolutions and early Capitalism. So, topics that are very heavy, you know, there's a lot of trauma there. And I tell them, nobody in these stories are cartoonishly evil, right, with a capital 'E'. I don't believe there's like this trans historical evil. People are doing things because they think it'll benefit them. And in some ways, I think that is more optimistic of an outlook for history because then it shows you that, well, we do have the power to change pretty much everything, and so I don't take the cynical approach, despite how dark the history I study is. I think the fact that so many of these dark chapters in history were made by people trying to make decisions that would benefit them in their moment. They're not doing it because they're cosmically or cartoonishly evil. That's powerful, right? That's the power in history, and I think that's really important. That's why complicating the past, like you said, it should make things more exciting.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:14

What do you think of the founder's concept of republicanism?

Elliot Warren 09:18

That's a good question. That's something that I'm actually wrestling with a lot in my dissertation, because I think one of the biggest issues that happens with republicanism is they don't really address political economy.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:29

Well, I suppose we should define that for our listeners too.

Elliot Warren 09:31

Yeah. Well, so political economy is one of those vague terms like capitalism that I think you could define many ways. But for me, in my research, I define it as the relationship of the state to markets and the theories behind that. So, it's pretty broad, right? It's everything taxing, spending.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:47

And maybe also republicanism. Small 'r' republicanism.

Elliot Warren 09:51

Yes. Small 'r' republicanism, absolutely. Yeah. So, I think the for the founders, it's interesting, republicanism has been one of those things that's been debated small 'r' republicanism since probably the '60s, even before we had the liberal school of thought, progressivism, republicanism, these different schools of thought that have tried to ascertain what the framers wanted by the republic. And I think republicanism is about the community, and I think that's an element that we lose often when we talk about the American Revolution. I think the zeitgeist about the revolution is about individualism and republicanism at its core is about the community, right? It's about protecting the community, and political economy is central to that. That's a big change that I'm looking at right now is that, you know, in the 18th century, political economies are really structured around the health of the community. Now, granted, what who's included in that community is going to vary a lot, and isn't necessarily everybody, but there is this sense that the greater purpose of economic of commerce, of economic growth is for the community, but the Revolution, I think, unmoors that a little bit. And I think republicanism because it doesn't define political economy so much it really opens, it really opens a lot of opportunities for the nation to go in many different ways with the economy. And we see that with the debates around [Alexander] Hamilton's economic plan, for example. But what I'm getting at here is the founders did not do a great job of defining what an economy looks like in a republic, right? They spent a lot of time on the political system. But the economic side of things is, I don't know if it's taken for granted. This is sort of what part of what my research is getting at at a more local level. But I think that for the founders, republicanism was much more tied to communities than we accept today, and so I think that there needs to be a lot more research done on how republicanism, you know, affected other schools of thought in early America, not just, you know, representation in Congress.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:00

Well alright, so that's a great lead in to talking about your research and your projects. So, tell us broadly about it, how you conceived of it, and what you hope to learn from looking at this.

Elliot Warren 12:18

Yeah, so the project I'm working on now, my dissertation tentatively titled, 'The Common Hall: Local Leaders and the Development of America's Political Economy in the Age of the French Revolution.' It's a bit of a long one working title, but so I am looking at local governments and the leaders who comprised them, and arguing that the way they both manage their communities and the way that they managed up as in their relationships to state and federal officers are instrumental in the development of America's political economy, and that you can't understand how our political economy developed in a way that supported

capitalism, just through Hamilton and just through federal leaders, because it doesn't matter if they didn't have buy in from below. And in an era where information is so challenging to spread, local leaders have a lot of authority, right? It's not like today, where the federal government has officers in every town, and the local government, in many cases, is the only arm of the state that most people will interact with. When I came to this topic, I was actually reading a wonderful book by Gabe [Gabriel J.] Loiacono How Welfare Worked in the Early United States. Fantastic book. When I was reading it, I had an aha moment. He talks about how welfare expenditures were among the highest municipal expenditures throughout the 18th and 19th century. And that really hit home for me, because before coming to graduate school, I actually worked in local politics, and it's sort of a truism that your local government does more for you than the federal government. You know your local but people don't pay attention to it. Local government manages your schools, your roads, your emergency services. And reading that book how welfare worked really emphasized, for me that, well, that was actually kind of true in early America as well, but I hadn't seen any historiography really emphasizing the importance of local government in the early republic. There's a lot of great studies that focus on communities and towns in the colonial era and up through the Revolution, like Barry Levy's Town Born. But a lot of these books, they end at the Revolution, and ones that go beyond the Revolution often focus on an individual community, which is great. We can learn so much from extrapolating. But I thought it would be really interesting to look at local governments in the aggregate, trying to see if there are trends between, or rather trends concerning how they are developing their ideas of the state after the Revolution. And so, I'm looking at that comparatively between Virginia and southern New England, you know, the two oldest parts of the country. Virginia's not thought of for having its towns and cities, but it does. There are great local records there. There's a really interesting municipal history in Virginia. And so, I think the comparative focus is really important. And then lastly, the final part of my title, is in the age of the French Revolution, because I don't think you can tell the story without the Atlantic, because, for two reasons, one, ideologically, the American Revolution, as I mentioned, did not settle questions about the economy, about political economy, and the French Revolution opens those back up again. They it really opens up those fissures that were unresolved from the Revolution. And then, more directly, it's the events themselves. The refugees coming from Haiti into Virginia and Rhode Island become a problem for municipal authorities. Municipal authorities begin fearing enslaved rebellions in their own communities. And a lot of these international events, they change the way municipalities interact with the state and federal government. They change the structures of political economic power. And it's these international events that, without them, I don't think would make it as clear of a change, right? I think we because we have these really interesting events that kind of shake things up, make people talk about stuff. You know, people are talking about the

warring parties in their ports, and they're responsible for managing it. So, we have these really interesting events that allow us to track those changes.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 16:21

What are the sizes of the communities that you're looking at and how many, roughly?

Elliot Warren 16:26

They're usually pretty small, hundreds to a few 1000. I'm trying to avoid, I shouldn't say avoid. I'm not really focusing on larger cities, because I don't want my project to be just about, you know, port cities or because I think that is its own historiography, and I'm trying to be broader than that. So, I'm I'm actually trying to maintain regional differentiation even within the areas I'm studying. So, for example, in Virginia, you know, we have the eastern shore is going to be very different from Richmond a growing industrial city versus in the western counties, which, remember, Virginia this time goes all the way to Ohio. There are towns growing all over them. New England a bit different. Obviously, the towns are much stronger. They have much stronger history, and there's many more of them. In Virginia people are much more spread out. Counties have much more significance in Virginia than in New England. But in general, yeah, they're they're pretty small. I am looking at Boston and Providence and Newport, so some bigger cities. But again, it's the 18th century, so nobody's really there's no metropolises.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:28

And what sources are you looking at?

Elliot Warren 17:30

Well of course the main source are town records. New England has done a fantastic job at preserving them. Unfortunately, many of them are scattered in local repositories, but the collections here have been great at not only with physical records, the microfilm collections from the Middlesex County records, but also town histories published in the 19th century were a very unexpected source for me.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:56

Any ones in particular?

Elliot Warren 17:58

I probably couldn't name a specific town in particular. However, I will say that they are very interesting for how the antiquarians both who wrote them, how they both document the history, but also how they analyze it. That's been a really interesting, I'd say, topic I wasn't expecting to pick up here. But the antiquarians who are writing these town histories, they know what I am arguing it seems like, in some ways. Like they are arguing, they are saying like, well, of course, the you know, local government was so important to the nation. Of course, New England's municipalities were so significant to our character. And it's interesting to me. I mean, obviously, right there, they have their own reasons for saying that in the mid-19th century, but it is interesting to me that they had that idea. And that seems to be something that we've lost a little bit that how important the local is, not just for what it can tell us about the broader picture, but like, literally, the local is influencing the national. We often use community studies, I think, to tease out broader trends. And I'm saying, and I think in an interesting way, some of these local historians of the 19th century are saying is, no, they're actually direct, there's a direct through line from municipal governments to our modern political economic structure.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 19:07

So, I understand that there are other repositories in the New England Regional Fellowship Consortium that you will be visiting but tell us about the ones you have gone to.

Elliot Warren 19:19

Yes. So, I just before here was at the Rhode Island Historical Society, which also allowed me brief sojourns into the State Archives and the Newport Historical Society, which have had fantastic collections as well many local records. And that really was great, great exposure for my dissertation to just immediately see the differences between the records I've been looking at in Virginia.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 19:43

And where else will you be going?

Elliot Warren 19:44

I'll be going to Hartford, Connecticut at the Connecticut State Library.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 19:47

What are some of the unexpected finds?

Elliot Warren 19:51

Yeah, that's a great question. So, I guess one of them I already mentioned on is these town histories really interesting. Also, within them, they just often publish their local records, which I guess, presumes that there is some interest in them. I've also found that Massachusetts towns are very activist, in a way that other towns I've looked at have not been. They seem to know what they want from the state and federal government in terms of broader policies, petitions about paper money, whether they want it or they don't. Massachusetts towns are actually very divided I would say. Even in one case yesterday, I can't remember the town now I was looking at, but they put out a statement, essentially, I don't know what you would call it, a resolution, that they were much more pro-Democratic-Republican than Federalist, which is not, you know, expected. I think we often think about these big regional divides. But again, that's the interesting thing about looking at communities, right? Everybody lives in a town. People don't really technically live in their state, right? At the end of the day, you live in a town, and all these big issues play out in the local as well. So, it's been really interesting to see like these big federal state debates that are happening in the 1780s and '90s, just coming through in town meetings.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 21:04

Actually, that's funny. That reminds me you were during one of our coffee breaks, you were talking about how these towns would have declarations of their own.

Elliot Warren 21:14

Yes. So, my undergraduate thesis really looked at those local Declarations of Independence are so fascinating to me. Pauline Maier did a great book on them [American Scripture](#). That book looks at the Declaration of Independence more broadly, but she does include a chapter and then an appendix, which includes many of these local declarations that happen at the town and county level. And they're fascinating. They range from bigger than our national one to just a paragraph, but it really shows that communities feel that they have power, and that's something we see today. I don't want to be too presentist, but we see today that communities are activist. I mean, with national issues around immigration, right, sanctuary cities, around abortion clinics, around cannabis dispensaries, local governments are staking a claim on broader issues, and that's always been true.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 22:07

So that may have already answered the last question, which is the impact of your work, right? What do you want people to take away from it? And it sounds like you are making a case about the long history of municipalities, of local governments, of small units of organization, having a large impact, a large effect on how people live outside of the storms of the national or even state political levels.

Elliot Warren 22:35

Right! Absolutely, that local governments are I want people to understand that they've always been relevant. You know, they're equally relevant today as they have been in the past. But also, I want them to understand, I want people to see that local governments are responsible for so much change. It's not just that they have power, it's that they've used it to really shape a national culture. I think that local governments show us that there have been lots of contingent changes around political economy as a cause of the Revolution. Basically that when you look at how governments manage themselves before and during the Revolution, there's a big change. I think that happens around the 1780s and '90s, and that's responsible for how we get to the culture of, I guess, federalism that we have today. And so, yeah, it's not just that they, they they had the power. It's that they used it. And we need to understand that's that's the only way we'll understand the present, right? Is that if we, if we see this under these under explored actors that were all over the United States, I mean, my dissertation is only looking at a few areas, but these, you could do this project anywhere, and I think find the same thing that these local governments are shaping the future. They're not just telling us interesting things about the past. They are actually directing the they're shaping the direction that our country develops.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 24:03

What has been your greatest challenge as an historian?

Elliot Warren 24:05

I guess that we were just talking about, right? Trying to make it relevant, but also not presentist, right? It's we always toe a fine line as historians. I mean, I personally believe history is political, and that can't be avoided. But that being said, history is not a cudgel, right? You can't use it as a weapon. And so, it is challenging toeing that line when you see such a clear connection to why things are today.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 24:33

Did you expect that? Did you expect to find the connection to today?

Elliot Warren 24:36

I expected that I would find something. I expected that when I when I read how welfare worked. I really, you know, at that point, I was like, well, there's got to be something. With my experience, like I said, I worked in local politics, you know, I in the back of my mind. I knew there had to be something there. I was not expecting to to find as many, or, I guess, as as clear trends as I have.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 24:59

So that does go back to research is 'mesearch' in some way.

Elliot Warren 25:04

Yeah. It does. Yeah. Honestly, now that you mentioned it, I don't think I would have fallen into this topic if I had not worked in local politics, right? Having that background, it gives you an edge when you're thinking about topics, right? People who don't, who had to, haven't had that experience, might not realize immediately how much power local governments have now or have had in the past, but, you know, having that experience like you say, it's 'mesearch'. I knew I had that assumption going in, and so that allowed me to dive right in, kind of headfirst, without any anything holding me back.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 25:39

[Outro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Elliot Warren, a PhD candidate at the College of William and Mary and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Podington Bear. Please see our show notes for details. Thank you for listening, and please rate, review and subscribe to both the MHS produced shows wherever you listen to podcasts.