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Warren Durgin's Gravestone and the Renewal of American Civic Democracy

By Theda Skocpol

More than a mile down a narrow winding road, the earthly remains of William Warren Durgin of North Lovell, Maine lie in a small out-of-the-way cemetery peppered with tiny headstones nestled amidst trees along a brook. The unpretentiousness of Durgin's resting place is appropriate for a backwoods farmer, lumberman, and spoolmaker who lived most of his long life—just over ninety years stretching from December 18, 1839 through January 27, 1929—in this very rural region of woodlands, rocky fields, and small hamlets at the western edge of Maine.

But the headstone for "William W. Durgin" is a surprise. On a large granite slab towering above the others, an inscription tells of the life-defining moment when Durgin served as "One of Abraham Lincoln's bearers and escort to Springfield Ill. Helped to place Remains in tomb." After four years of exemplary service in the Union army during the Civil War, 1st Sergeant Durgin was chosen one of eight honorary pall bearers. He helped carry the presidential casket to the hearse, escorted it to the Capitol where Lincoln lay in state, and rode the famous funeral train as it made its lugubrious way from Washington D.C. to Springfield, Illinois.

As if serving as Lincoln's pall bearer were not enough, Durgin's gravestone tells us much more about the doings of the man known in life by his middle name, "Warren." Under the dates bracketing his

birth and death, a boldly engraved line says that Warren Durgin was a "G.A.R. Commander"—that is, the elected head of his local post of the Grand Army of the Republic, the post-Civil War association of Union veterans. The next line of the stone indicates Durgin's affiliation with the "P. of H."—referring to the Patrons of Husbandry, or Grange, where Durgin was probably a member of Kezar Lake Grange No. 440 of North Lovell. Finally, in an oblong rectangle at the very top of the gravestone appear three intertwined loops—a sure signal to those in the know that Warren Durgin was affiliated with a leading U.S. fraternal association, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, no doubt as a member of Crescent Lodge No. 25 of North Lovell.

Warren Durgin's gravestone first came to my attention after my husband, Bill Skocpol, learned about it while driving the back roads of western Maine. Out of curiosity about the man whose life and death the gravestone marked, we obtained more information from the Lovell Historical Society and from Durgin's grand niece, Mrs. Hester McKeen Mann of South Paris. When I later went to see the gravestone first hand, I was stuck by how many strands of America's civic history Durgin's story illuminates. The activities featured on his gravestone offer a window into America's rich civic heritage—and suggest ideals we might strive to recreate amidst the upsurge of

patriotism and social solidarity that our nation has experienced since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

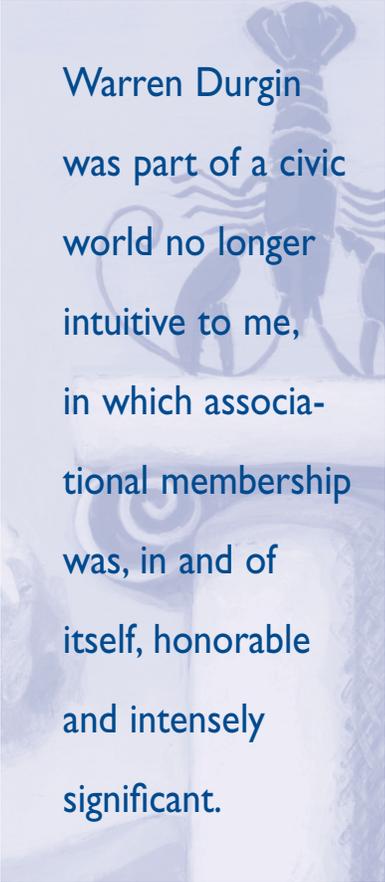
The sight of Durgin's gravestone brought home to me, for one thing, how much the meaning of associational affiliation has changed. Gazing through the dappled forest sunlight from the vantage point of many decades later, I could readily understand why Durgin would want to proclaim for all eternity his service as Abraham Lincoln's pall bearer. But given such momentous wartime service, why add the ties to the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), the Grange, and the Odd Fellows? Much as I value my own memberships in the American Political Science Association and the Social Science History Association, two fine scholarly associations in which I have had the privilege to hold high office, I could not quite imagine asking for "APSA" and "SSHA" to be chiseled into my gravestone. Warren Durgin was part of a civic world no longer intuitive to me, in which associational membership was, in and of itself, honorable and intensely significant.

Other reflections came to mind. By the time I saw Durgin's resting place, I had already done enough research into the history of U.S. voluntary associations to realize that this humble man, a poor farmer and laborer, had been a member, even an officer, in exactly the same groups joined by many of the most privileged and powerful Americans of his day. The Grand Army of the Republic, the Grange, and the Odd Fellows not only appear on Durgin's gravestone. During the decades surrounding 1900, these same associations were proudly listed in the biographical profiles of the businessmen, well-to-do farmers, and educated professionals who served as Maine's U.S. senators and representatives and as its elected

state officials. What is more, the same associations were frequently cited by the more urbane and cosmopolitan officials of Massachusetts—indeed membership in them was proclaimed by leading U.S. citizens in and out of government all over the United States.

The Odd Fellows, the GAR, and the Grange were three of the largest and most encompassing voluntary membership associations in all of U.S. history. These and dozens of other major associations were launched by civic organizers who took inspiration from America's federally organized republican polity—so much so that they modeled their organizations after U.S. governmental institutions, creating vast, nation-spanning federations consisting of local chapters linked together into representatively governed state and national bodies. Union victory in the massive Civil War of the 1860s was a key watershed in this story, for it gave renewed impetus to the creation and spread of cross-class voluntary federations. In addition to the groups Warren Durgin joined and later emblazoned on his gravestone, other prominent voluntary federations launched in the late nineteenth century included the American Red Cross, the Knights of Pythias, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the Knights of Columbus, and the General Federation of Women's Clubs. All of these groups worked closely with the U.S. government to fight subsequent wars; and many of them championed social reforms and state and national legislation offering public benefits to American families and people in need.

Durgin's joint proclamation of Civil War service and membership in great voluntary associations thus made symbolic as well as biographical sense. As U.S. leaders did when they saved the Union by



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mobilizing volunteer armies and relief efforts, the organizers of America's greatest voluntary associations involved fellow citizens from various walks of life. They aimed to gather good men or women (and occasionally, as in the case of the Grange, men and women together) into vast, encompassing associations that mirrored—and had the power to influence—local, state, and national affairs in the democratic republic of which they were a part. Not only Warren Durgin, therefore, but millions of other Americans of modest means could readily become members, even officers, of the same voluntary associations that enrolled the most privileged and powerful citizens. And ordinary people had ways to influence public affairs and legislative debates at the state and national level. Although particular associations rose and fell—the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars eventually replaced the Grand Army of the Republic, for example—group memberships shared across class lines were characteristic of much of U.S. civic life from the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries—that is, for all the decades of Warren Durgin's earthly span, plus a few more.

But how greatly American civic life changed after the 1960s! Membership associations such as the Elks, the PTA, and the American Legion lost influence compared to professionally managed groups and institutions. As of the early twenty-first century, it is almost impossible to imagine a humble man like Warren Durgin belonging to the same voluntary associations as the high and mighty. To the extent that nationally influential membership groups still flourish, they are likely to be professional associations for people employed in specific occupations.

Otherwise, national public life is dominated by advocacy groups—associations run by professionals from headquarters in Washington, D.C. or New York City. Most advocacy groups have no state or local chapters, and if they have “members” at all, such adherents are usually recruited individually via computerized mailings. Mailing-list adherents do not meet or talk with one another.

At the state and local level, today's “voluntary groups” are usually nonprofit institutions through which paid employees deliver social services and coordinate volunteer projects. Many Americans occasionally volunteer to help local food banks, hospitals or youth projects. But sporadic volunteers do not necessarily get to know one another or participate in decisionmaking for the project, as members of traditional associations would have been able to do. What is more, volunteers are usually middle-class people who dispense help to the poor and the vulnerable. Thus, in our contemporary civic world, it is much easier to imagine Warren Durgin as the client of a nonprofit agency, or as a recipient of charitable assistance offered by a temporary volunteer, than it is to envisage him as an active member of any group that includes people from a broad range of social backgrounds—apart, perhaps, from a church congregation. In Maine, there are more exceptions to this new situation than in many other places. But, even here, faithful members of surviving lodges, granges and women's clubs are likely to be quite elderly men and women.

The changes that have remade American civic life in recent times are not all bad. After collecting checks from interested citizens across the nation, professionally run advocacy groups like Common Cause and the Children's Defense Fund

can lobby effectively in Washington, D.C. and state capitols. Environmental advocacy groups sometimes team up with chapter-based associations that actively involve members in state and local projects. And of course local nonprofit groups do wonderful work reaching out to the poor and the vulnerable.

Nevertheless, something has been lost. People have fewer opportunities to meet fellow Americans from other walks of life. Sporadic volunteers are more likely to do things *for* others, rather than *with* them. And most charitable groups stay out of politics, which means that Americans have fewer opportunities to move from social fellowship to active political citizenship. In America's civic past, many voluntary membership federations combined local charity and social activities with participation in legislative campaigns at the state or national level.

In the aftermath of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, a new civic spirit has spread across the United States. People are not only reaching out to family, friends, and neighbors, but are also looking for ways to express shared citizenship. To assist the immediate victims of September 11, some 70% of Americans gave time or money to charities. More than four-fifths of us started displaying U.S. flags on our homes, vehicles, and clothing. And trust in government “to do the right thing” soared, reversing decades of erosion.

Such signs are reminiscent of the civic spirit that accompanied and followed previous American wars—from the Civil War through World Wars I and II. Tragically, the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 1970s divided Americans, resulted in a nationally demoralizing defeat, and undercut rather than reinforced patriotism and shared civic activities. But Americans

are much more united in response to the horrors of September 11 and it will be interesting to see whether we can take advantage of this watershed to build enduring shared endeavors.

To realize the new possibilities revealed by our solidary response to the horrors of the recent terrorist attacks, Americans should seize the opportunity to renew our organized civic life—forging new links between local projects and national purpose, and creating new venues for citizens of all walks of life to come together in shared endeavors. If we act in this way, we may be able to recreate for our own time a new version of the vibrant American civic democracy in which Warren Durgin took such evident evident and active pride. 🐉



A summer resident of Mount Desert Island and member of Trenton Grange Number 550, Theda Skocpol is employed during the academic year as Victor S. Thomas Professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard University, where she also serves as Director of the Center for American Political Studies. Skocpol has served as President of the Social Science History Association, and in 2003 she will be President of the 13,000-member American Political Science Association. Among her many books are Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States (Harvard University Press, 1992), and The Missing Middle: Working Families and the Future of American Social Policy (W.W. Norton, 2000). The essay appearing here is adapted from the introduction to Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life (forthcoming from the University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).