The Survey of Manuscript Source Material in Pennsylvania

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To writers of history and research students the discovery of manuscript collections bearing on their subject is like an oasis to a desert traveler. Such discoveries, however, are not common, for no attempt on a broad scale has ever been made in the United States to locate collections in out-of-the-way places, in small towns and country homes. The Historical Survey now in progress in Pennsylvania, under the general supervision of Dr. Curtis W. Garrison, the State Archivist, is now attempting to do this very thing. Much success has already attended the efforts which have been made to bring to light these private collections. It is difficult to imagine the reactions of the regional supervisors, whose task it is to uncover these, as they discover day after day letters and papers of estimable historic value. What is the procedure used and how are these things unearthed?

Perhaps the first and most important step is to make contacts with the officers of the local historical societies. In almost every instance they know of members of their society or local residents who have letters, papers and account books in their possession. Then an attempt is made to make contacts with local historians and writers who may have used unpublished material in the preparation of their works. Such persons often know the names of other people having collections, so the list grows, sometimes reaching rather large proportions. In addition, articles in newspapers, telling of the nature of the survey and requesting those having old letters and papers to notify the supervisor or a selected officer of the local historical society, have been of great value in arousing public interest. In some cases, radio appeals have been made with excellent results.

The next step is more difficult, for with it the actual work begins. These people must now be approached and this requires a great deal of time and tact. Many are actively engaged in business and can be seen only after their working day. Others
are playing a prominent part in the social world, and arranging an interview is a problem. All this requires much time and often a day is spent without producing any tangible results. Of course the list which the supervisor has made is not a sure indication that material exists. Many times no papers are there and in some cases they have been destroyed because of a lack of appreciation of their historic value. Once the appointment has been made it is necessary to get some idea of the extent and value of the collection and arrange for one of the workers in the district to make the survey. In general the owners have been extremely considerate and helpful but in some cases it has been necessary for the supervisor himself to make the survey because of the fact that he was better known than the worker assigned or because of the extreme value of the collection. The winter season is not a propitious time for work of this kind because many collections are stored in unheated attics.

Far more important, however, is the question: what has been discovered? At the present stage of the survey no detailed report can be given, for this phase of the work was the last to be started and, unfortunately, the first to be curtailed. Nevertheless, it is safe to state that many valuable letters, papers and documents have already been brought to light, for even in many of the local depositories, such as the historical societies, no one knew exactly what was there. Among the more important and more valuable things unearthed have been letters of John Paul Jones telling of the difficulties experienced in building the early American navy. One of the Jones' letters states that he had received no pay for almost two years. Of interest to Pennsylvanians is the discovery of letters of James Buchanan, Thaddeus Stevens, Tench Cox, and Bayard Taylor. Of interest to students of military history will be the letters of Colonel James Burd describing the conditions in central and western Pennsylvania during the French and Indian War, and the diary, account books and payroll of Captain Zebulon Butler from 1758 to 1772. In the national field, correspondence of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln has come to light. In other categories might be mentioned unrecorded deeds going back to the seventeenth century, receipts for the sale of slaves, many Civil War letters and valuable old church records. Among the latter, the minutes of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting from 1694 to 1776 and the records of old German
churches are of particular interest. The survey of the latter has disclosed, in a most striking form, the difficulties over the language question which, in many cases, led to a separation of those desiring the use of English.

What will be the ultimate value of this phase of the survey? The first, and perhaps most important result, will be the preservation of much material which otherwise might be destroyed. Many people have stated that they were contemplating throwing away letters and account books which they thought to be of no value. But to the historian they are important and thus they will be saved as a result of the intercession of the supervisor. In several cases such collections were given to depositories. In the second place, the description and location of these private collections throughout the state, with the consent of the owners, may be made known to students of history. In many instances, such consent has already been given. This should greatly aid in the preparation of monographs, articles and local histories and should be a decided stimulus to the study and writing of Pennsylvania history.