HAS THE HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE STATES BEEN NEGLECTED?

By Roy F. Nichols, Ph.D.
University of Pennsylvania

The history of the United States can be explained in a variety of ways, and the task of interpreting it can be approached from several angles. From time to time new possibilities of interpretation appear and new points of view present themselves calling for a reconsideration of familiar data. There are at least three ways of analyzing American history: as the evolution of a nation, as the development of a group of federated states, or as the continuous adjustment of the interests of a group of geographical and social sections. The first two categories have proven the most popular and the technique and tools of historical investigations have been developed around them. Subjects for scholarly investigation have been most appealing when approached from a broad national angle, while collecting agencies for the assembling of materials are generally either national, as in the Library of Congress and the National Archives; or state, as within the great variety of state archives, historical societies, county and city record offices, and public libraries, all of which are primarily interested in some relatively small environment, state or local.

The third, or sectional category has need for material collected from a different point of view, namely for the purpose of defining the distinguishing characteristics of each region. The historians' consideration of sectionalism has suffered from lack of accurate definition. North and South, East and West, New England, Middle West, and Far West are the terms most used. Sometimes Southwest and Northwest, and the border states are alluded to; only rarely does one hear the Middle States spoken of as a distinct section. This group is generally carelessly yoked with New England as the East, or with New England and the western states and described as the North. This middle section, con-
sisting of New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey, however, has an individuality which as yet is indistinct for want of proper study and definition, but which when revealed, will assume marked significance.

Certain characteristics of the Middle States are of course obvious. The climate and topography are more favorable to livelihood and health than either New England or the South. In this region, there developed the first cosmopolitan society, much more varied in its composition than that to the north and to the south. Variation in religious ideas and social customs also accompanied this cosmopolitanism. As a result, economic endeavor was more versatile and profitable. A prosperous commerce and a comfortable agriculture could flourish together, instead of commerce predominantly, as in New England, and agriculture monopolizing efforts, as in the South.

Questions naturally arise from these generalizations. Did these characteristics mean that emotion was going to have a more natural outlet here than in New England where so much effort was frustrated by the rugged soil and so much emotion penned up by religious discipline, or than in the South where the heat and the slave system made physical action undesirable and promoted leisure in which vivid imaginations might experience many vicarious adventures and produce an abnormally sensitive psychology? Did the natural release of energy in the great reward of prosperous living invite concentration on wealth and bodily comfort and give little time for imagination to play on fancied wrongs or hated sins? Does the fact that farmers in this section have been relatively more comfortable mean a real gulf between Middle States and Middle West where a militant farm group has colored existence? Are we to conclude that the Middle States have been lacking in emotional variety, that their understanding of spiritual values has been restricted? If so, what significance is this emotional poverty in the life of the nation? Have business men and politicians of this section been less able to exercise a social imagination, less sensitive to social injustice? Has this led to an undue concentration upon materialism, accumulation, corruption, unscrupulousness? Are these characteristics changing? Such are some of the questions we need to answer if we are to understand the Middle States and their influence as a force in American history.
This Middle States point of view has to be reckoned with something distinct; one of the significant factors in American history has been its relation to and the influence by the other sections. Sometimes it has overborne the enthusiasm of the West and New England. Occasionally, as in the Civil War, it has been carried along. But the process has been largely neglected because the Middle States have been submerged during Civil War times as part of the North, and since then as part of the East. Perhaps they have merged with New England and the Middle West; perhaps the section has lost its identity, but if so, the course of this merger and its causes would make significant pages in American history.

For the proper study of this section, we need much additional data—data not usually collected by many of the great Middle States repositories. Ideally speaking, what we need is some vigorous collector like Professor William K. Boyd of Duke University to create a library of the Middle States such as he has brought together for the South at Duke University. However, though this is hardly possible, yet the material needed is of such a character that it cannot be adequately gathered with only the present agencies at work. The kind of data to which I refer may be classed as ephemera.

In studying sectional characteristics some of the most important elements in the situation are the passing emotions, fancies, obsessions and prejudices of the mass of the people. To a certain degree these are captured in the press and in literature, but there is much that is lost. In the first place, the wide variety of pamphlet material, the bane of every librarian's existence, but the joy of the collector and the light of the student, arises from so many sources that if history depends only on what the city and university libraries preserve, the greater part is inevitably lost. Then there are newspaper files. Metropolitan papers are as likely as not to be saved, but it is surprising how many county and country papers have disappeared. Also there is cheap and ephemeral literature, so revealing of the popular taste which has a way of being discarded even from libraries when their shelves get too full. Then finally, there are thousands of revealing private letters, singly unimportant perhaps, but in the aggregate presenting an excellent picture of the popular mind. Many more of these could be saved without much trouble if enough people
were interested in seeking them and space in libraries could be
given up to them.

There is rare opportunity for history teachers and students,
especially in colleges which are not located in large cities. Each
could become a local center for the salvaging of the ephemera
and local periodicals which might otherwise disappear. As an
example of what might be done let me cite what is perhaps the
outstanding example of collecting in recent years in the United
States. In 1899, Trinity College at Durham, North Carolina,
had a small library of 10,000 books, but Professor John S. Bassett,
and for a much longer period, Professor William K. Boyd worked
at it and gradually built up a great historical collection with
particular emphasis upon the South. When Trinity College
became Duke University, Dr. Boyd, with more resources at his
command, began his real campaign. One of his objects was to
build a great library of southern history. He traveled far and
wide through the southern interior with ever greater success. A
great variety of manuscripts, not only of prominent and obscure
politicians, but of authors like Poe's friend, Chivers, whose "lost"
papers were discovered in quantity, and the writings of Paul
Hamilton Hayne, were gathered in and salvaged. Business
papers, not only of plantations, but of mercantile houses; military
papers not only of Lee and the other generals, but also from the
most obscure soldiers; the lost statutes of the last Confederate
Congress, all were procured. Besides these came a multitude of
books and pamphlets including many rare or unique southern
imprints. The result is a great collection—the South within
four walls.

Such a concentration of material in any one place in the Middle
States is perhaps not possible. But there is need for the collection
of a great deal if historians are ever to have the data they need to
study the real characteristics and influence of the Middle States.
If each college history department in the Middle States in general,
and in Pennsylvania in particular, set itself up as a collecting
agency, even though funds are lacking as they are in most places,
much that otherwise would be lost might be saved. Newspaper
files and pamphlets, to say nothing of letters and ephemeral novels
need more attention if we are to have accurate knowledge of the
popular interests and emotions of the Middle States. Such
knowledge is essential if we are to define the characteristics of
this section and thus become able to measure its strength as one of the essential elements in the development of our national life. The Middle States should be recognized just as vividly and clearly as the South, the West, or New England.