IT IS TIME TO PLAN THE COMPREHENSIVE HISTORY OF PENNSYLVANIA*

By William A. Russ, Jr.
Susquehanna University

TEN YEARS ago last January the first number of Pennsylvania History appeared. Its leading article was “Greetings from a Neighbor,” which was an address made on April 28, 1933 by Dixon Ryan Fox to the newly organized Pennsylvania Historical Association. One of Dr. Fox’s appeals was that the Association undertake the writing of a history of the state. Said he: “In fact, I know few states comparable at all with Pennsylvania in a rich past which are so much in need of a general history from the times of Penn to those of Pinchot.” No doubt one of the main aims of the founders of the Association was to encourage the writing of a volume history of the commonwealth. How have we answered Dr. Fox’s appeal?

The year after Fox’s article was printed, Dunaway’s fine, one-volume work appeared. It has served its purpose well. He did the exploring and set up the landmarks for the large, general work. But so far we have not carried on any further. Fox said New York was in the process of writing a ten-volume history, and added: “I may say that your need is greater than ours.” In fact the need still exists. We might as well be honest and admit baldly that we continue to be humiliated by our seeming inability to do what New York, Illinois, and other states have done. To be sure, such a project has been talked about, but usually with the feeling that the job was too big and that we should let George do it.

I will not concede that we do not have the brains. To the contrary, we have historians who are as able, or abler than those of other states. My own feeling about the matter is that so far there has been no concerted will to achieve, no organization to press the issue, no group or person with sufficient obstinacy to overcome the

*Read at the annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, Harrisburg, November 11, 1944. A resolution was passed providing for a committee to study plans for the comprehensive history of Pennsylvania.
difficulties and push the thing through to a successful conclusion. Perhaps such a project cannot be fully carried out during the war, but planning can be done. I suggest that some organization like the Historical Commission, the Pennsylvania Historical Association, or a similar group take up the challenge. It is high time; indeed the task should have been started years ago so that it could have been completed in time for the celebration of the tercentenary of Penn's birth. If we procrastinate, it may not be done before 1982, if by then.

Heretofore the delay has been excused by the plausible statement that the spade work had not yet been done; and that considerable numbers of monographs and articles must first be produced before any person or any group could hope to write the history of the state. Perhaps this may have been an acceptable argument until recently. But the last ten or fifteen years have witnessed a renaissance in historical interest in Pennsylvania. This renaissance has taken many forms. The organization of this Association in 1932 and the activities of the Historical Commission within the last decade have implemented that renewed interest. They have caused the publication of much material that could be called spade work, running from the printing of documents to research articles and monographs. Valuable work was performed by WPA. The University of Pennsylvania Press has launched its admirable series called Pennsylvania Lives. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania continue their excellent work of making raw materials available. The long awaited bibliography of secondary historical writings will appear soon.

These developments convince me that enough has been produced to justify the statement that we can, and ought to make a start towards a synthesis.

Suppose, however, that I am wrong. If I am wrong, then let us do some planning to get what is still needed. Maybe we shall have to use drastic measures, particularly if the editor of Pennsylvania History has to keep reminding us that he needs good articles. The Snyder County Historical Society has used one method. Some years ago it was decided that we had done enough talking about writing a history of the county; we would begin by beginning. And so the Society designated Dr. George F. Dunkelberger to
write the book, with the understanding that he had the privilege of assigning subjects to members of the Society. The member, upon agreeing to research on a given topic, was expected to dig up the facts, read them as a paper at a regular meeting, and then turn the article over to Dunkelberger. From the accumulation of information thus produced plus information from his own searching, he will write the history in his own style and in his own way. This method is somewhat drastic, and might not appeal to historians in general; but it is one way of getting a project started. In other words, if the spade work is going too slowly, let us get a plow.

Still another method that might be exploited further would be for our graduate schools to assign more masters' theses and doctoral dissertations in Pennsylvania history; and to prevent duplication of effort, they should keep one another informed of topics being investigated. Some good things have already come from this sector, as for example, Selsam's *Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776* and Brunhouse's *Counter Revolution*. But note that Selsam's dissertation was written at Princeton. It is a fine compliment to us that universities in other states think our history is important enough to justify research. Why do we neglect our own backyard? Paul W. Gates published in the first issue of *Pennsylvania History* a list of the research projects then being carried on with some phase of Pennsylvania's past as the topic. One of the striking things about the Gates list was the number of research projects on Pennsylvania that were being done by persons in the universities of other states. Why not begin at Jerusalem? I believe that since Gates published his article more of that is being carried on, particularly at the University of Pennsylvania; but if it is true that insufficient digging has been going on, then the graduate schools must be called upon for more efforts.

In the third place, we can do more work in Pennsylvania history over and above the dissertation level. Many of us have been searching for gold in the Seven Cities of Cibola when we have it right in our own premises. True, some re-tooling might be necessary. Professors who have been teaching in Pennsylvania colleges have all too often produced works in the history of other states, or in the history of the nation, or other countries. This writing has been admirable and has brought glory to all concerned; but it does
not uncover Pennsylvania material. The writings of Dunaway, Selsam, Brunhouse, Giddens, Bining, Klein, and many others, point in the right direction, but we need more of the same activity.

In a word, if we require additional material before beginning the general history, we must somehow get our men to do more writing on Pennsylvania. They should be told that there is a market for their products in the sense that almost anything of merit on Pennsylvania history can find a publisher—a statement that is not true of all other fields.

On the other hand, suppose I am right in the contention that sufficient material has already been gathered; what sort of project should be planned? In my judgment the following considerations ought to be kept in mind, when and if the great history of the state is written:

(1) It will probably have to be a co-operative venture because one individual could hardly encompass the entire field. Each volume or topic should be done by an expert in a certain era or subject.

(2) If co-operative, the work should be written in its final form by one hand in order that it have uniformity of style, organization, and interpretation. One author is absolutely essential, because otherwise each volume or topic will differ in treatment from others. Cooperative histories are usually patchworks of variegated styles, interpretations, and emphases. And so, in order to avoid this common weakness, one writer—let us call him the chief author—should have the power to take the manuscripts of all individual authors and mold them into an integrated whole. The chief author must be empowered to change the style and organization of all contributions, to rewrite certain portions, and to delete repetitions. He must not change facts and interpretations, however, without good reason. Such an understanding would require a great deal of the spirit of self-sacrifice on the part of each subsidiary author, because all of us are testy about what we write and all of us want the proper credit for what we do. But that could be arranged. If it were thought to be wise, each subsidiary author's name could appear over his volume or contribution. After all, what book or article has ever been published exactly as the author wrote it and without editorial revision? Even better, the subsidiary author could be given credit in the preface or in the table of contents. However the ticklish problem may be handled, this
much must be kept in mind: the great history of Pennsylvania should not be a patchwork.

(3) The style, organization, and format must be beyond reproach. We want this work to be read; read by the high school student and the average citizen, as well as by the professional historian. It must not be the kind of dry, historian's history that is shelved away to gather dust. The history of Pennsylvania is interesting enough to justify its being interestingly written. That is not to say that we want to put out a cheap, slangy product that would later shame us. The duty of finding the golden mean would fall largely upon the chief author, and he must be carefully selected. We want neither a hack-writer nor a footnote-worshipper. What we need for the job of chief author is a Pennsylvania Carl Becker. If one cannot be located, we should wait awhile before producing the history, much as it is needed.

(4) The work must be scholarly, dependable, authoritative. The footnotes and bibliography demanded by the professional historian should be included, but included in such a way as not to scare the general reader.

(5) It should be more than factual; it must be interpretative as well. We need a synthesis of the history of Pennsylvania, answering such questions as: What is the underlying theme of Pennsylvania history? What contributions has the state made to America in general? What is the frame of reference that ties the events of our history together so they are meaningful? This is simply a different way of stating that we do not want just another history, or just another encyclopedia of facts, organized on the basis of governors' terms. We have enough of such. The high school student, the teacher of history, and the general reader want to know about the trends and developments, and not merely what happened, slice by slice, in each three- or four-year term of every governor. In fact I know of no more deadly way in which our history could be written than to organize it—particularly after the Civil War—upon the dreary political bickerings, and sometimes the scandals, of each governor's term. We need not omit the governors, but they should be written up in such a way as to avoid the mechanical listing of each governor, and his term, chapter by chapter. Indeed the history would not lose much if some of them were politely forgotten so far as the text goes. For those who
require the details about where each governor was born, when he served, and when he died, let them find what they want in an appendix.

Any plan of organization for a history of the commonwealth, offered at this stage of the game, can only be tentative.

But, whatever the final set-up may turn out to be, it is time for us to be doing something. We should get the history of Pennsylvania written while there is still an interest in state history. Too long we have thought about the project and dawdled. In 1935 I asked the question, "What is the matter with Pennsylvania?" Two years later S. K. Stevens answered me by asking another question: "What is wrong with Pennsylvania historians?" Well, then, what is the matter with us historians?