THE SOURCES OF THE ORIGINAL
DICKINSON COLLEGE LIBRARY*

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WITH the granting of the charter to Dickinson College in 1783, the college fathers began immediately to assemble a library for the new institution. Although the assembling of the book collection was often as discouraging as the accretion of a working capital, General John Armstrong, President pro tern of the Board of Trustees, could announce in 1787 that “the library already consists of two thousand seven hundred and six volumes, in the Hebrew, Latin, English, French, German, Low Dutch and Italian languages, the donations of gentlemen in England, Scotland and Philadelphia.”

Although this statement is the earliest discovered description of the college book collection, it is singularly noncommittal, for it serves only to reveal the physical book content of the library and to establish the geographical identity of its benefactors. Since neither contemporary manuscript nor printed catalogue was available to expand this bare information, it was necessary to turn to manuscript sources and to examine the remaining volumes in order to discover the origins and subject content of the original library and the efforts expended in collecting it.

Physical examination of the volumes gradually disclosed the identity of the library’s donors. Most of them had divulged their identities to previous searchers, for James Ross, the first librarian, and Dr. Benjamin Rush had carefully inscribed in many of the volumes the donor’s name. Therefore, from the cartographical profiles of General Armstrong’s statement, the gentlemen in England emerged as Granville Sharp, Dr. John Coakley Lettsom and

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1Statement on the inside wrapper of the February 1787 issue of The Columbian Magazine or Monthly Miscellany.
Dr. Richard Price; in Scotland, as Dr. John Erskine; in Philadelphia as John Dickinson, Dr. Benjamin Rush, Richard Peters, Jr., William Marshall, Samuel Vaughan, Robert Bell, William and David Hall, Thomas Bradford, William Young, Francis Bailey and Thomas Dobson. The examination also revealed donors who may be generally but somewhat questionably classified as Pennsylvanians, i.e., Dr. Samuel McCoskry, Robert Magaw, Samuel Tate and James Baxter.

The advantage of this identification in analyzing the sources of the library are many, but the loss, since 1787, of almost seven hundred books from the original collection inevitably means the loss of the identity of certain donors and this loss creates a certain inadequacy in any evaluation of the original sources. However, those donors identified present a sufficiently varied cross-section of interest in the educational project of the founders to provide a summary study of the collection.

Manuscript search indicates the extent of the trustees' effort in acquiring the library. William Bingham from England in August 1783 wrote an optimistic report of the possibilities of English assistance. He summarized his view of the situation:

"Policy dictating the Necessity of Cultivating a Great commercial connection with the United States, has in View the immediate Advantage to be derived therefrom —thus far we may place Dependence, on their professional Attachment."

Bingham's actual solicitation of help for the new college was extremely disappointing. He wrote his fellow-trustees of his failure in December 1783. "They [the English] have invariably informed me that no Success could now be expected in this Undertaking."

This discouraging news did not decrease the pursuit of assistance from the British Isles. The trustees tried various sources. A letter to Dr. Charles Nisbet, soliciting his acceptance of the presidency of the new school, also suggested to Dr. Nisbet the importance of his securing books for the library. Dr. Benjamin

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4 Trustees to Dr. Charles Nisbet, Carlisle, Penna., September 29, 1784, Dickinsoniana Collection, Dickinson College.
Rush, the leader of the college fathers, investigated the possibility of aid from his English humanitarian friends. He wrote Dr. John Coakley Lettsom and requested the Quaker physician to beg a few books among his friends.

The Sweepings of their Studies will be very acceptable in our illiterate wooden country. The Lumber of the Stalls in the Streets of London, which are sold by weight, would make us truly rich.⁶

Although these efforts to obtain British help were not fruitless, the Philadelphia area yielded Dr. Rush and his colleagues their principal reward. This reward came from John Dickinson, whose interest in this proposed school across the Susquehanna, Dr. Rush had stimulated. This stimulation resulted in Dickinson's gift of approximately fifteen hundred volumes from the library of his father-in-law, Isaac Norris, the younger.

These volumes formed an excellent nucleus for a college library. They represented certainly the scholarly and bibliophilic interests of two, and possibly of three men—Isaac Norris, the elder; Isaac Norris, the younger; and possibly James Logan, the intimate friend of the elder, and the father-in-law of the younger Isaac Norris. The library of the two Norris' reflected at least sixty years of continuous extensive intellectual activity and concomitant collecting. Letters of Isaac Norris, the elder, give evidence of his interest in and ability to evaluate books. In 1707 he wrote to Joseph Pike concerning a book entitled *The Rights of the Christian Church*:

The book is four hundred and sixteen pages, showing original and natural lights of government upon Sidney and Locke's principles, and that 'tis absurd and inconsistent with the very being of a government to have two independent powers in the same society; that the clergy's endeavoring at it, is upon Papal principles and inconsistent with the Christian religion, with much more. . . .⁶

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Writing to James Logan in 1710, he discussed completely different publications:

I received per Charles Read, the *Anno 1709*, also the second volume of the *Tatler*, which I am pleased with. I should have overlooked them... had not thou recommended them, and by that taught me to find instruction as well as delight. Turning them over, as one is apt to do at first opening, by letting the leaves fly from under my right thumb, I stopped at last in the second volume, No. 114, and read it, and that directing me back to No. 95, I was more than ordinarily taken with them...

The senior Norris' bookcollecting proclivity is perhaps reflected in those items of the college collection which were formerly in the libraries of Sir Robert Clayton, one-time lord mayor of London, of Gilbert Burnet, Lord Bishop of Salisbury, and of Robert Uvedale, English schoolmaster and horticulturist. The libraries of these English collectors were sold by booksellers during the elder Norris' lifetime and were probably bought by either himself, his son, or his friend, James Logan, on one of their several visits to London.

After the death of his father in 1735, Isaac Norris, the younger, continued to add to the library. His niece, Mrs. Deborah Logan, in an account of the physical library at Fairhill, furnished information of the manner in which the collection was housed at this time.

It [the library] was placed in a low building, consisting of several rooms, in the garden, and was a most delightful retreat for contemplative study; the windows curtained with ivy; the sound of 'bees' industrious murmur' from a glass hive which had a communication from without, and where their wonderful instinct could be viewed. Beautiful specimens of the fine arts and many curiosities were also collected there, the shelves were filled with the best authors, and material for writing and drawing were at hand.

The most interesting items in the college collection, which Norris, the younger, added to the library during his lifetime, are

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those purchased from the library of Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford. The greater part of these books Norris purchased in 1752 from Thomas Osborne, a London bookseller, to whom the widow of Edward Harley, Robert Harley's son, sold the library. Norris indicated in a letter to Osborne on March 16, 1752 that he had, prior to the writing, purchased some Harleian items from a New York bookseller but that he had found these volumes in unsatisfactory condition. Desiring to secure items in better condition, he included in the same letter a list of titles from the Harleian Catalogue of May 1749, which he wished to buy. At the same time he wrote to Richard Partridge and requested him to check on the condition of the titles he ordered. The existing Harleian items in the Norris collection are of some bibliographic and bibliophilic interest. They are witnesses to the skill of the bookbinders, Thomas Elliott and Christopher Chapman. They are bound in calf, morocco and Russian leather with the characteristic gilt border. One volume bears the name of Robert Harley stamped in gilt on its cover.

Most of the books purchased by the younger Norris contain the bookplate designed for Norris by James Turner. Turner, an early American engraver, migrated from Boston to Philadelphia around 1746 and worked there until his death in 1769. The plate is of Chippendale design and confronts, in addition to the plate of Harley, that of the Duke of Newcastle, Earl of Leicester, John, Lord Bishop of Ossory, Sir Philip Sydenham and Peter Dobroe. From whose collections Norris purchased items and added to his own.

Only coincidental evidence corroborates Stille's statement that Norris the younger inherited from James Logan, his father-in-law, a library of extraordinary value. At least the remaining Norris items in the college library do not confirm this fact. Unless those books containing a note in Norris' hand "rebound in 1751" were among the bequest of Logan to his son-in-law. The collection, it seems, reflects Logan's intellectual and bibliophilic interests rather than any of his actual holdings. Cannon in *The Logan Papers. Wallpaper Letter Book, 1735-1755*, p. 72. Hist. Soc. of Penna.


Stille, *op. cit.*, p. 316.
American Book Collector writes of Logan's interest in Aldine imprints. The Norris collection contains some late examples of that press. Later Logan felt the price commanded by an Aldine press book to be exorbitant and collected items from the press of the Estienne's. There are titles in the Norris collection representing the press work of each printer of the Estienne dynasty. The subject matter of the books is also identical, both libraries containing titles by Flamsteed, Bellarmine, Halley, Boyle, Wallis, etc. The collection, it seems, discloses the close mental and social relationship existing between the two families rather than the actual gift of volumes from one to the other.

Of the fifteen hundred volumes from the Norris collection originally presented Dickinson College, five hundred fifty-five identified items remain. There are one thousand fifty-two unidentified volumes, belonging to the original library, the greater part of which were probably included in Dickinson's gift. At least certain common bibliographic features point in that direction, such as similarity of subject matter and manuscript marginalia, provenience, and style of binding. The identified Norris volumes cover the subject fields of medicine, science, law, religion, history, philosophy, language and belles lettres. In addition to Estienne and Aldine imprints, the collection contains examples from the presses of Elzevir, Gryphius, Plantin, Froben and John Day. Forty-two of the titles are listed in Pollard and Redgrave's Short-title Catalogue of English Books, 1475-1640. This collection formed a surprisingly plausible nucleus for a college library, especially so, when one considers the absence of conscious scholarly intent in the assembling of the collection.

Judge Richard Peters added to the nucleus formed by the Norris collection with a gift of fifty titles. Volume Nine of the Peters Papers in the collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania contains a list of the Peters gift. However, only seventeen of the forty extant Peters items agree with the titles listed. It would seem from this disparity that Judge Peters either changed his mind concerning the titles or gave to the library on more than one occasion. These books are principally of interest because of their provenience. Among them are items from the library of his uncle,

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12 Carl L. Cannon, American Book Collectors and Collecting from Colonial Times to the Present (New York, 1941), p. 32.
Richard Peters, secretary of the provincial land office. Of the elder Peters' books, one contains a note of presentation from James Logan.

Dr. Benjamin Rush not only solicited gifts for the library but was also one of its donors. Sixteen titles in the collection testify to his generosity. Among the books are several of his own works, which he inscribed "from the author to Dickinson College." There is also a four volume set of Norton's Remarks, bearing the bookplate of the high priest of the American Tories, Jonathan Boucher.

The remaining identified donors in the area of Philadelphia were principally booksellers and printers. Of first importance in the number of extant items is the gift of Robert Bell, one-time employer of Thomas Paine and printer of Paine's Common Sense. The Bell gift of which twelve titles exist, includes several items from his own press, among which is an edition of Thompson's The Seasons. Philadelphia 1777. Five volumes represent the interest of Thomas Dobson, publisher of "The British Encyclopedia." William and David Hall, sons of Franklin's partner, David Hall, were also among the library's benefactors. Eight volumes give evidence of their aid. Two beautiful examples of the Foulis' press, a Homer and a Callimachus, were included in the Hall gift. Thomas Bradford, William Young, Francis Bailey, James Baxter, Robert Magaw, William Marshall, Dr. Samuel McCoskry, Samuel Vaughan and Samuel Tate complete the list of American donors. The contributions of these benefactors vary from one to ten items.

Dr. Rush's correspondence with the English humanitarians resulted in gifts from Granville Sharp, Dr. John Coakley Lettsom and Dr. Richard Price. From attributable items, Granville Sharp was the most benevolent. Letters from Sharp to Dr. Rush indicate that he [Sharp] added to the book collection on at least two occasions. In July, 1784, he wrote:

My Friend Mr. Fisher of Philadelphia has been so obliging as to take charge of a Box of Books which I have addressed to your care for the public Library at Carlisle. The Books consist of the Writings of my Grandfather & Father, together with my own . . . to them I have added an interlined Hebrew & Greek Bible, which will be useful to Students of Divinity.14

Again in September, 1785, Dr. Rush received a letter from Sharp concerning a shipment of books.

The Collection of Books [sent] consist partly of old Books which I purchased from the Catalogue of my Bookseller, such as I supposed must be useful to a public Library, and partly of Old Editions of Books, which I obtained at a low Price because I picked them out of the Refuse of his Shop, which were not Catalogued; for otherwise (to tell you the truth) I could not have afforded to send you so many. But inferior priced Books are sent agreeable to your Desire signified in your 2 last kind Letters of 5 April and 5 June, to send you the Sweepings of Libraries, & indeed I have no other mode of obtaining even Sweepings, but by Purchase.

I was careful however to send none but Books of some Character & Authority, & especially Law Books; because I was informed that Law Books are at this time in great Request in America.

Forty-five items of Sharp's gift remain in the collection. Among them are several of Sharp's own works: A Declaration of the People's Natural Right to Share in Legislature (2d ed. London, 1775) and A Tract on the Law of Nature and Principles of Action in Man (London, 1777). The 'sweepings of Libraries' also contain six items from the library of Narcissus Luttrell, celebrated English collector of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. No information exists to disclose Sharp's source for these items. Perhaps the bookseller, perhaps a friend.

As his letters indicate, Sharp gave some consideration—as much as money would allow—to his selection of titles. The prevailing concept of the lawlessness of the Americans no doubt prompted his decision concerning the need of law books. His interest in American education, however, was not new, for at an earlier date he had presented books to the libraries of Harvard and Brown Universities.

The two other identified English donors, Dr. Lettsom and Dr. Richard Price, are represented by thirty, and three volumes respectively. Dr. Lettsom's gift consists of a thirty volume set of the Journal of the House of Commons. It is also possible that he gave

other titles. At least such is vaguely implied in his letter to Dr. Rush in July, 1785.\textsuperscript{16} It is probable that these books were of a legal nature, for the Quaker physician emphasized the need of such books in the same manner as Granville Sharp. Dr. Richard Price gave a three volume set of Hoadly's work. The existing books and a letter to Dr. Rush corroborate this gift.\textsuperscript{17} If he gave more volumes to the library, they have disappeared.

The Scottish benefactor, Dr. John Erskine, long evinced interest in America. Volumes in the libraries of Harvard and Yale Universities witness this interest. The Erskine gift to Dickinson College was probably the result of his friendship with Dr. Charles Nisbet, the college's first president and a fellow minister in Scotland of Dr. Erskine. Seventeen items, chiefly religious tracts in the German language, remain from the Erskine donation. A typical title among these remaining volumes is Velthusen, \textit{Predigen, Homilien und Reden}, Leipzig, 1783.

The remains of the original collection total two thousand twenty-six volumes, six hundred eighty items less than stated in the \textit{Columbian Magazine} announcement. These volumes include one thousand fifty-two unidentified English and continental imprints prior to 1800, and seventy American imprints of the same period. No pertinent information exists concerning the donations other than the statements of purposeful selection by Granville Sharp and Dr. John Coakley Lettsom. Many unquestionably gave books as books. The printers and booksellers gave of their stock-in-trade, and it would not be at all surprising to discover that some of the titles given by them were those that were selling very slowly. The Norris collection, while containing items of interest and value to a scholar, was filled with many medical treatises and polemical volumes, which were of little use to the student. The conclusions of Shores in his book \textit{The Origins of the American College Library} are equally true of the original Dickinson College Library.\textsuperscript{18} The library came into "tangible existence" upon John Dickinson's presentation of the Norris books; the collection did not make up in quality what it lacked in quantity; and the foundation of literary society libraries

\textsuperscript{17} Richard Price to Rush, Newington Green in London, January 1, 1783, Rush MSS, Corres., XLI, 11.
—the earliest at Dickinson College was founded in 1791—was tacit criticism of the usefulness of the original library. Despite this criticism, which may not be completely void of the prejudice of vantage point, the Dickinson College Library in 1787 compared favorably in statistics and in subject matter with the libraries of the older colonial colleges at that time.