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Pennsylvania Artist—1720-1784
Portrait by Charles Willson Peale
WHEN the *Handbook of Historical Societies of the United States and Canada* was revised a few years ago it was revealed that Pennsylvania had reported the largest number of historical societies within a particular state. On the surface, at least, this could be hailed as an evidence that the Commonwealth possessed an acute historical consciousness exceeding that of any other state. I am inclined to feel, and this judgment is based upon my personal acquaintance with local historical society activity throughout the nation, that Pennsylvania has developed the local historical society more fully and to higher planes of achievement than is true of a majority of our sister states. We not only may have more societies, but I am sure that we have more societies actually working and with commendable plans and programs of historical activity. I do not know of any single society in the entire United States which has a more well-rounded program of historical work than is characteristic of such Pennsylvania organizations as the Historical Society of Berks County, the York County Historical Society, and several other of the larger and more prosperous county societies. I have heard of few societies in other states which have the vigor and the modern approach to bringing local history to the people which characterize many of our smaller county societies, notably the Bradford, Mifflin, Blair, and Wayne county societies. I hasten to say that I mention all of these societies merely as outstanding examples.

*Presidential address delivered at the meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, Carlisle, October 21, 1949.*
There are many others which are doing splendid work far above the national average.

When one turns to the state level of historical activity the comparison is more difficult to make. There is no uniform pattern of state historical work in the United States. Roughly speaking, there are three prevalent types of historical organization. Especially in the Middle West, we have the strong state-wide historical society type of organization subsidized by public funds but managed and controlled as a privately chartered institution. The Wisconsin Historical Society is probably the strongest of these and is typical of this type of society. It is a state historical and archival depository. It sponsors research and publications. It also assumes leadership in work with the press, the schools, and other public and service agencies in bringing Wisconsin history to all the people of the state.

The New England version of the state historical society is more conservative and centers around the privately supported museum and manuscript depository with emphasis upon publications for the members. Little, if any, responsibility is assumed for promoting the conservation of history or for arousing public consciousness regarding the state's history on a state-wide level. This type of historical organization is by no means limited to New England.

There are a few states in which the larger share of the burden for historical work is carried by a state commission or department of archives and history. North Carolina, Mississippi and Michigan are notable examples. In such states there is usually also a so-called state historical society of the New England pattern. Public funds are expended, however, through the commission or department, both for collecting and preserving historical materials and for publications and public relations activities. In these cases the work of the state agency invariably overshadows that of the privately supported organizations. In New York, however, we have the example of a powerful state historical association entirely supported by membership and endowments or gifts. It is the dominant force in state-wide historical activity in the Empire State, though a state division of archives and history functions at Albany.

I provide this brief analysis of national conditions to furnish a point of comparison with our own Pennsylvania situation. Here, to repeat, we have some of the strongest and best local societies in the country, but the pattern of state-wide historical work is a jigsaw
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puzzle to every one outside the Commonwealth. I am not sure even a majority of historically-minded Pennsylvanians understand it. Perhaps the very fact that we have no strongly knit central historical program has cultivated the local historical society type of organization. That is one reason we have so many and such strong county historical societies. In the Middle West the state historical society has tended to overshadow and to discourage, without intention of course, the rise of strong local societies. Most directors of mid-West societies are now trying to correct this situation and to encourage formation of local societies.

In any effort to provide an understanding of historical activity in Pennsylvania at a state level, which will give some basis for intelligent planning for the future, it is necessary to review a little history and to attempt to bring a few salient facts into focus upon the problem. We have in Pennsylvania several state historical and archaeological organizations or associations rather than a single, powerful, central body dominating the historical field. In some ways that may be a very good thing. In other respects it may not be good. It certainly presents us with some major problems and is an explanation for many weaknesses in the past in the failure to develop our historical resources.

The oldest and the most venerable of our state historical organizations is, of course, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania at 1300 Locust in Philadelphia. Organized in 1824, it celebrated in December, 1949, the 125th anniversary of its birth. It is well endowed, well managed and one of the principal manuscript depositories and research centers for American history in the United States. All Pennsylvania has a right to be proud of this great historical society and happy that in one hundred twenty-five years it has made the greatest single contribution in this state to conserving our historical manuscripts and records.

The Society originated, like so many other good things in the intellectual history of Pennsylvania, from activity started by the American Philosophical Society. At the American Philosophical Society meeting on March 17, 1815, it was decided to create a "Committee of History, Moral Science, and General Literature." The history of the American nation in general and that of Pennsylvania in particular were commended to the committee for attention. One Peter S. Du Ponceau was named corresponding secretary to
the committee. On August 15 of the same year it published a general address to the people calling for information on aboriginal, religious, and political history of Pennsylvania. Du Ponceau began a voluminous correspondence with individuals within and without the Commonwealth. He was one of the first conservators of Pennsylvania's historical heritage.

This initial endeavor rather well exhausted itself within five years, was revived in 1840, and then expired entirely, so far as the American Philosophical Society was concerned. In his "Discourse on the Early History of Pennsylvania," delivered before the APS in 1821, Du Ponceau reported upon his collection of materials "which only wait for the hand of the artist to work them into shape." He was led to conclude, however, that "Pennsylvania still wants an historian." Another member of the committee commented upon the public indifference to the work. This was indeed a low period in Pennsylvania's interest in its historical treasures, whether manuscripts or buildings. It was in 1816 that the Pennsylvania Assembly directed the sale of the State House and State House Yard to the highest bidder. The Liberty Bell was included, and it was expected that the yard would be cut-up into building lots. Fortunately, the City of Philadelphia exercised its option to purchase the cradle of our republic for $70,000.

Perhaps it was the visit of Lafayette in 1824 which stirred a sense of history in the breasts of Philadelphians. Or maybe it was the celebration, in November of that year, of the 142nd anniversary of the landing of Penn, with the grand dinner at the Penn House in Letitia Court, on November 4, addressed by Mr. Du Ponceau. There is a theory also that the example of the New York Historical Society influenced the thinking of several Philadelphians. Whatever the cause, a meeting held at the house of Thomas Wharton on December 2, 1824, resulted in appointment of a committee to draft a constitution and by-laws for a "Society for the purpose of elucidating the history of the State." On February 28, 1825, William Rawle was elected the first president of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. It is interesting to note that the oldest of the seven founders of the Society was a mere thirty-eight years of age. The two youngest were but twenty-four.

We need not concern ourselves here with the early struggles of the Society. Certain points do need emphasis. The Society was
founded essentially upon the New England and New York pattern of a state historical society supported from private membership and income. It did not ask for nor did it receive any state aid until 1903, when its present building was erected. It was a society devoted in early years primarily to an intensive effort to collect and to preserve the manuscripts and other sources of Pennsylvania history wherever they might be located. In 1826-27 it began its notable publications with the Memoirs.

Under its early leadership the Society was not without a decided interest in the larger historical matters of the Commonwealth. In 1836 it united with the American Philosophical Society in memorializing the Assembly of Pennsylvania on behalf of the publication of certain of the historically important provincial records of the state. This movement was sparked by the ever alert Peter S. Du Ponceau. From this effort came ultimately the entire series of Pennsylvania Archives. Indeed, from the day of Samuel Hazard to that of Dr. Thomas Lynch Montgomery the influence of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania has been predominant in the production of this notable series of state papers of Pennsylvania.

Evidence of wide range of interest was also indicated by the intensive drive in every corner of Pennsylvania and the nation for the documents and manuscripts which were needed to provide the basis for research and writing on the history of the Commonwealth. Based upon these materials, in a large measure, monumental new contributions to the historical literature of Pennsylvania and the nation began to appear in increasing number in the 1840's and after: Ingersoll's Historical Sketch of the Second War between the United States of America and Great Britian, three volumes in 1845; William Reed's two-volume Life and Correspondence of Joseph Reed, in 1847; Samuel Hazard's Annals of Pennsylvania from the Discovery of the Delaware, in 1850; Winthrop Sargent's History of an Expedition against Fort Du Quesne in 1755 under Major-General Edward Braddock, in 1855; and Hazard's famous Register of Pennsylvania.

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania did not lose its larger interest in historical matters in the decades following the Civil War. It is not perhaps well known, but the Society played an important rôle in establishing the National Cemetery at Gettysburg. It intervened to prevent the destruction in Philadelphia of such historic
structures as Congress Hall. It helped direct the nature of the Valley Forge Park establishment when it was created in 1893. In 1894-95, the Society initiated the project to copy the Journals of the Lords of Trade and Plantations from the files of the Public Record Office in England, which was completed in ninety volumes. It continued to energize the publication of Pennsylvania’s archives. Indeed the public and state-wide nature of the Society’s work was recognized when the Commonwealth, in response to direct appeal from the Philadelphians, by act approved May 15, 1903, appropriated $50,000 to aid in the erection of the present building which houses the Society. Ultimately the Commonwealth contributed $150,000 toward the building, as contrasted with $21,700.00 raised by the Society.

While the Society had called upon the state for aid, there appears even at this date to have developed some feeling that The Historical Society of Pennsylvania did not perform fully the larger obligations of a state-wide historical organization. Its greatest manuscript collections were national in importance but originated largely from Philadelphia sources, which was no doubt very natural. Other activities of the Society centered within Philadelphia as a sphere of influence and appeared to many to have an antiquarian and genealogical tinge which reflected the influence of old Philadelphia families.

Whether or not this sentiment was justified, there was organized in 1905 the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies in an effort to secure some state-wide cohesion of interests and activities upon the part of the growing number of county and local historical societies. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania co-operated in this move, and did not attempt to organize its own program to include any responsibility for co-ordinating and encouraging the work of local societies throughout the state. If one reads the reports of committees and the resolutions of early meetings of the Federation, one recognizes the outline of a desire to achieve certain objectives in promoting Pennsylvania history which might have been served, in part at least, by The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, had it chosen to develop as an aggressive, state-wide historical society. Content with its new building, its vast manuscript collections, its own publication program, and the aura of social distinction which covered all of its activities, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania remained aloof from the problems of local history in the state.
The Federation, however, was a loosely constructed organization held together by the feeble threads of an annual meeting and annually elected officers. If all its resolutions and committee recommendations had been followed, the millenium soon would have been reached in Pennsylvania history. The Federation lacked one of the most vital ingredients for any successful activity—a treasury and a secretariat. This failure of the Federation to achieve its aims was probably behind the desire to create some state agency devoted to Pennsylvania's history and records. Interestingly enough, it was a president of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, who had become governor of the Commonwealth, Samuel W. Pennypacker, who started the ball rolling. Perhaps it was because, to use his own words, Governor Pennypacker was the first president of the Society who had not always "dwelt south of Market Street." In 1900, Dr. Herman Ames of the University of Pennsylvania and Dr. Lewis S. Shimmel of Harrisburg had surveyed the state's records for the American Historical Association. Governor Pennypacker took the lead in establishing a State Archives for Pennsylvania. A little later, in 1913, the Pennsylvania Historical Commission was created by the Assembly. For the first time in its history, the Commonwealth had taken steps to create governmental agencies which would assume responsibility for conserving and developing the history and records of Pennsylvania.

This Pennsylvania Historical Commission functioned as an independent agency directly under the governor until 1924, when, under the new Administrative Code, it became a dependent commission under the Department of Public Instruction. As you know, during the administration of Governor Edward Martin the Commission was divorced from the Department, was restored to independence, and was given jurisdiction over both the State Archives and the State Museum, which were also separated from Public Instruction and the State Library. It was renamed the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

I assume all of you are more or less familiar with the Commission and its work. It has made genuine contributions to Pennsylvania historical literature through publications. It marks historic sites and has custody of numerous historic sites and buildings. Currently, the Public Records Division or former State Archives, and the State Museum are undergoing a rejuvenation. For the first time, a co-
ordinated program of history, records, and museum development is possible at the state level, aided by state appropriations. There are limitations to the commission type of organization. It is dependent upon state appropriations and these can vary, though they have been increasing steadily. We now have as much money for collection of historical materials and for publications and research alone as was appropriated for the entire Commission program fifteen years ago. It is my feeling that the work of the Commission in co-ordinating local historical society work in the state has been one of its major contributions. Our current intensive drive to conserve historical material on microfilm is well known to you. In the last two years the Commission has spent some $20,000.00 on publications which represent a major contribution to our historical literature. A like amount is in prospect this biennium.

Dissatisfaction with the absence of a scholarly program of state-wide activity upon the part of the individual societies, and, in the minds of some, the failure of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania to fully represent state-wide historical interests, motivated the organization of the Pennsylvania Historical Association in 1933. Its birth was inspired principally by the remarkable progress of the New York State Historical Association. Leadership of the Pennsylvania Historical Association has been primarily in the hands of the scholars. I presume it would be agreed that its major contribution has been the publication of the quarterly, *Pennsylvania History*. The co-operative venture of the Association in securing funds from the American Philosophical Society to compile a bibliography of Pennsylvania history and to publish it through the Pennsylvania Historical Commission was a monumental undertaking for which the Association deserves great credit. It is my feeling that the annual meetings held in various sections of the state have done much to develop state-wide historical activity on a higher level of achievement.

We now turn to the delicate but all-important problem of the future of Pennsylvania history. It is obvious that we have a multiplicity of historical agencies with a considerable overlapping of interests and functions rather than a single, strong state historical organization. I believe the chief weaknesses in this condition are self-evident. There is a division of funds and energies and a lack of unified approach to our basic historical problems. For example, the
failure of any of the existing agencies to do anything about archaeological interests led to the formation of yet another state-wide private society, the Society for Pennsylvania Archaeology. A state organization for preservation of landmarks has been suggested. A majority of states which have a single state historical society have been able to produce monumental state histories in several volumes, a type of publication which Pennsylvania sadly lacks. It is my opinion that this lack of a unified approach to Pennsylvania history is also largely responsible for our failure to have a state building to properly house a museum, public records, and historical treasures. This situation is very serious because The Historical Society of Pennsylvania does not provide a museum of this type. It can do nothing in the field of public records, though it did hold for protection certain state documents appearing in the original published Archives. It cannot today meet fully the need for a depository of manuscripts, newspapers, and other basic sources, serving the entire state.

Within the last few years a temporary state of unity has been achieved among all the agencies, but upon a highly artificial and personal basis. This rests mainly upon a peculiar overlapping of offices. The Director of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania is presently a member of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, and also a member of our Council. The Federation officers overlap considerably with those of this Association. At the moment I happen to represent the state Commission's historical function, the secretaryship of the Federation, and the presidency of the Association. But these are temporary situations and do not represent a permanent contribution toward the creation of a central historical authority.

It is my feeling, based upon twelve years of close contact with the historical activities of Pennsylvania, that we are still in need of some strong and vigorous state-wide, privately supported historical society, which will promote steadily and constructively all the historical interests of this great Commonwealth. It is my further belief that this Association provides the best channel through which this may be achieved. We are so organized as to permit a great potential expansion of individual and institutional membership throughout the state. There is no reason why endowment and other sources of income should not be explored. This Association should,
and ultimately must, have some type of permanent secretariat and offices. This can be done only by securing further income from membership and other sources. We need to study the organization, the sources of support, and the program of the New York State Historical Association as a possible general pattern.

In order to achieve these ends it will be necessary for the Association to further develop its program and to bring it into harmony with the historical needs and interests of the state. I feel that we should explore the possibility that members of local historical societies might become at least subscription members of the Association, receiving *Pennsylvania History* with its articles and especially its news and comment on historical activities. Our historical society people need this contact and stimulation which they cannot and do not receive from the Federation. We may need to alter and to expand the contents of our magazine to give it wider appeal and value to lay historians and educators. Perhaps we should make overtures to the Society for Pennsylvania Archaeology regarding a merger and the creation of a Pennsylvania Historical and Archaeological Association. This would strengthen both organizations in membership, finances, and publications. In particular, it seems to me that possibilities for larger financial support through endowment, contributions, and subsidies of projects from foundations or learned societies should be considered. Furthermore, this Association should take a more vigorous rôle in promoting through appropriate channels all good causes in Pennsylvania history. We do need a comprehensive state history, and this will require public financing, unless a considerable sum could be secured from private sources. The situation regarding a state history, records, and museum building is still confused and the Association may be able to break the log jam. Such a building is desperately needed.

In short, through the creation of a strong state-wide historical association we should be able to integrate the best achievements of all existing organizations and to provide a basis for sound, long range development of Pennsylvania history. I feel that this development may be the answer to what is wrong with Pennsylvania history.