SIR WILLIAM JOHNSON (1715-1774)

From engraving in Stone, The Life and Times of Sir William Johnson, Bart.
THE MERCER MUSEUM OF THE BUCKS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
From Bucks County Historical Society *Papers*, Volume IV.
THE BUCKS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The richness of Pennsylvania's history is well enough known. Not so well known is the richness and variety of her historical records, preserved, through the generosity of private donors, in libraries and museums throughout the Commonwealth.

With this issue, Pennsylvania History introduces a series of articles designed to show what our historical societies are doing to preserve and display the records entrusted to them.

THE MERCER MUSEUM

By John Cummings, Curator

The Mercer Museum of The Bucks County Historical Society at Doylestown might be called the realization of a dream. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Dr. Henry C. Mercer, a well-known archaeologist and man of vision who was not hampered by convention, began to study the tools, apparatus, and methods of work used prior to the advent of the machine age. This museum, and the unusual building that houses its collection (an edifice designed in adaptation of the eighteenth-century Gothic revival) represent the fulfillment of Dr. Mercer's desire to make the best fruits of his study available to everyone.

Originally intended as a background for the study of the developing life of the settlers, first, of Bucks County, and then of Pennsylvania, the collection was soon to become dubbed "the tools of the nation maker," and ultimately came to embrace the story of mankind. For, in his study and collecting, Dr. Mercer soon discovered that the tools and methods in use before the machine replaced skilled human effort, had changed but little since Biblical times; and, where most archaeologists lose contact with the present, Dr. Mercer simply turned the pages of history backward, establishing a common meeting ground for past with present and
providing still another evidence of the well-known fact that all
things are derivative in their nature.

He began his collection just at the right time. In his generation
the fine old tools and apparatus of an earlier day, gathering dust
and rust in cellars, garrets, and sheds, were being thrown out as
rubbish and given to the trash man, or were finding their way into
the scrap piles of junk dealers. Fortunately, at that most critical
moment, Dr. Mercer appeared to “rescue” many priceless items
which might have gone to ineluctable oblivion. His passion for
gathering, preserving, and studying these various objects has given
to us a collection which is almost unique. Certainly this Museum
has preserved for posterity those things which the ordinary mu-
seum does not, or cannot, contain. In variety, size, and complete-
ness, this collection is quite unmatched elsewhere, and it would be
virtually impossible to duplicate it today. It is safely stored in a
building specially designed and constructed for the purpose.

Perhaps the items are not always displayed in a manner most
advantageous, but the objects are there for study, and the public
may obtain a very excellent general picture. It is not always pos-
sible, nor perhaps even desirable, to place certain objects on promi-
nent display; nor, because of size and space limitations, can we
always group objects together in an ideal juxtaposition.

In addition to our tools and apparatus of the trades and crafts,
we have a multitude of those things used in the homes, which two
or more generations ago lightened labors, improved living, or
might even have been a necessity for everyday life. Some of these
objects were fabricated by craftsmen. Others were the product of
the skill of some member of the household. Some, most certainly,
come under the heading of “gadgets,” although they were impor-
tant to their owners and users. All represent some part of the
mobiliary arts, as well as the uses, skills, and customs of by-
gone days.

In this day of hurrying to the store for every real or fancied
need, it seems difficult for us to visualize the skilled self-sufficiency
of our forebears. They made their own candles, stuffed their own
sausage, rendered their own lard, made their own soap; and they
did these things, as well as countless others, using such devices as
are found in this collection. About the only two trades or crafts
not well represented here are the pewterer’s and the glass maker’s.
The woodworking trades are particularly well represented. How many people today know that before carpentry or cabinet making existed under these names, there were house-wrights, wheelwrights, shipwrights, together with “joyners,” turners, coopers, and, curiously enough, the trades of the coffin maker and the pump maker? Most modern workers would be unable to guess the name, or, in some instances, to imagine the use to which some of these ancient wood-working tools were put. Probably herein lies a part of the difference to be observed between the mass production wares of the machine age and the product of hand craftsmanship. The machine alone can do quite handsomely what it is made to do, but these ancient tools were guided by the heart and hand and brain of man in creative endeavor to satisfy human needs.

The primary object, or most essential need, of man being food, naturally much emphasis is placed on those activities which had to do with obtaining, producing, or processing food—both as an industry and as a domestic endeavor. In this category, the foremost place is properly accorded to agriculture, but hunting, fishing, and trapping are not slighted. Since man is (or is supposed to be) a civilized creature, cookery in all its variations and branches looms large. The developing refinement of kitchen utensils is well illustrated; and, along with this trend, we may see the attempt to increase the elegance and appeal of the product of the culinary art. This is aptly demonstrated by attempts at embellishment, as also by the ornamental cookie cutters, springerle (“springley”) moulds, fancy baking ware, et alia.

The conversion of natural fibers into thread or cloth is of considerable importance. There may possibly be absent from our collection—but we do not think so—some types of “great wheel” for the preparation of yarn (woolen), or types of jenney or flax-wheel for spinning of linen, or some variant of loom for a special purpose. Products of this craft, whether made at home or by those who plied the trade as a means of livelihood, are not lacking. One may also note the paraphernalia of the allied activities of needlework, tailoring, and laundering. To complete the picture of appareling, we may see the shop and gear of both cobbler and hatter.

Means of transportation of the pre-railroad era are not neglected. There is an excellent collection of vehicles, including the stagecoach and Conestoga—so vital in settlement, development, and ex-
pansion. Crafts closely allied or basic to these are the wagon builder's, coach maker's, harness maker's, and saddler's, all of which may be studied here.

The Museum contains, of course, the tools of the smith, basic to all other tools and trades, together with certain allied crafts, such as those of the tinsmith, file maker, and founder. There are also certain very unusual or odd crafts represented, such as that of the comb maker, the watch or clock maker, the broom or basket maker, and even the chair painter.

Ceramics come in for a large share of attention. The actual operations of the craft may be seen, and the complete gamut of the products of the potter, from the lowly common clay brick through decorative tiles and earthenware to fine china and the priceless sgraffito ware. The mills or querns used by the potter to grind his materials to the proper fineness are present in wide variety. Potters' mills differ but slightly in fundamentals from the mills used to grind other things, such as grain. There is wide variation in type, means of operation, and chronological position in the history of these curious but important objects.

We must not forget that the general activities alluded to had for their purpose the production of objects to be used by individuals. To complete our picture, we must see some of the things that formed a part of the intimate environment of men and women of an earlier time. It is to this end that we have glass and china, silver and pewter, coverlets and costumes, and a modicum of characteristic furniture. Certain personalized activities find representation in the professions of physician, surgeon, and apothecary, which minister to the physical being. The work of the musician, the printer, the painter, the school master, and, far from least, the minister, are an essential part of the picture showing wherein man differs from the beast in his mode of life.

The history of the development of mankind is rather closely interrelated with fire, fire making, and lighting equipment. The long, slow, painful ascent from barbarism is lighted by the flickering flames, first of the fire, then of the torch; still later by crude lamps; and, finally, by types of lighting devices whose use has come down to modern times. A fascinating field is shown in the marvelous diversity of lighting equipment that depends upon combustion as the source of illumination.
We must not leave this field without mention of heating equipment, but mere mention it must be, since the Bucks County Historical Society’s collection of stove plates and Dr. Mercer’s _magnus opus—The Bible in Iron—are too well known to need elaboration. There are, in addition, many other items in this part of our collection besides stove plates!

The Museum contains also excellent collections devoted to fire protection and weapons.

What has been accomplished is so to have arranged our exhibits that the individual items are available for present study and yet are safely preserved for the future. It is our privilege, thanks to the initiative, generosity, and foresight of Dr. Mercer, to be able to study and enjoy such a collection. Perhaps his vision had its stimulus in Proverbs 29:11. However that may be, the results are of benefit to all, and the privileges derived therefrom carry more than a little obligation. There is here much for the serious student and particularly for the researcher. At the same time the exhibits are interesting and accessible to the average individual.

A collection such as ours is vitalized history! It is the story of man striving with his environment to fulfill his needs. It is what we might justifiably call a graphic story of man’s activities and achievement, as he progressed through the ages. It shows better than any book can tell—better than any recounting of battles, or political movements, or great (and near great) personalities—the story of mankind through the ages. The story has a local flavor, with a bit of national bias—yet it is the story of mankind. The knowledge of past achievements enables man to strive for even greater progress in the future and to even higher creative success.

THE LIBRARY

BY AUDUBON R. DAVIS, Librarian

THE collections of the Library of The Bucks County Historical Society are as rich as those of the Museum, but their display is more difficult. Historic objects are easily displayed but historical facts must be dug for. The value of a library lies in two prime essentials: how well the collections fit into the purposes for which
the library was formed, and the rarity of the individual items in
the group. Considered from either of these angles the Bucks
County collection is certainly rare.

There are numerous manuscript collections in the fields of local
history, genealogy, and law. In genealogy the emphasis is on Bucks
County, but families in the surrounding counties are also repre-
sented. The Society was fortunate in having as librarian for many
years an untiring genealogist, Mr. Warren S. Ely. In the course of
his genealogical researches Mr. Ely corresponded with the repre-
sentatives of many families and studied Court House records
minutely. As a result he became thoroughly acquainted, among
other things, with the lands held at various times by various people
in the county. His studies unearthed many obscure and interesting
facts of local interest. When he died the Society came into posses-
sion of most of his papers, several real estate maps which he drew
from old deeds in the Court House and here in the Society, be-
sides many of his published genealogies containing valuable manu-
script corrections and addenda.

Another librarian, Mr. George MacReynolds, was an author and
scholar, and his papers also came to the Society. Mr. MacReynolds
devoted the better portion of his later years to a study of the Doan
outlaws, members of a prolific Bucks County family whose rami-
fications now extend throughout the United States and into Can-
adu. The voluminous correspondence and notes resulting from this
interest are here for the use of future students.

Judge Henry Chapman's letter-books, opinions in cases—many
of them notable—charges to juries, and other records, a veritable
mine of information on Bucks County's past, are here in their en-
tirety. Nor are law books and genealogies the end of the Library's
resources in Bucks material. It possesses school records, trades-
men's account-books, the ledgers and accounts of various grist
mills, among them that at Tinicum and the famous Mearns Mills.
Here are the minutes and records of the Bucks County Temper-
ance Society, the early libraries and library associations of Doylest-
town, diaries of individuals prominent in their day and the events
of that day, all waiting only for the researcher to bring their con-
tents and the invaluable stories they can tell to light. Several among
the manuscript collections are important enough to demand special
mention.
Foremost among these is the mass of manuscripts coming from General William W. H. Davis. Founder and first president of the Society, General Davis was a man of many and varied interests. Soldier, scholar, historian, and author, he bequeathed a formidable mass of documents to the Library. Serving in the Mexican and Civil Wars, and as Attorney General to the territory of New Mexico, he kept diaries with meticulous care. As a commander in the Union armies during the Civil War, he kept records of the various campaigns in which he was engaged, as well as letters and orders. These, together with notes for various books he had published, are part of the almost inexhaustible material left for future students to work upon.

A second, and no less great, collection is that of the late Dr. B. F. Fackenthal, who succeeded Dr. Mercer as president of the Society. Dr. Fackenthal was for years head of the Durham Iron Works. His collection contains deeds, trust agreements, journals, ledgers, day-books, and the correspondence of the Bucks County industry so important in the colonial history of Pennsylvania. Among the items are a trust agreement, the accounts and final statement of the trustees for Elizabeth Growden Galloway who inherited the important industry from her father, Lawrence Growden of Bensalem, only to lose it when her husband, William Galloway, turned Tory. In addition to the Durham papers, there are documents of historical importance collected by Dr. Fackenthal as a result of his interest in other aspects of the story of old Bucks.

Mr. Edward R. Barnsley, President for ten years until his resignation in 1950, has given a notable collection of documents illustrative of colonial Bucks life and history. Emphasis is on Newtown, where the Barnsley family has lived and played an important part since colonial days, but Mr. Barnsley’s interests have been too catholic to confine his collection to a single township or county. Space does not permit elaboration of this, and many other of the really important sources for historical research held by the Library, but there is one other, very extensive, collection which must be noted. This is the records and minutes of the Volunteer Fire Companies of Philadelphia.

Comprising all the records, minutes, journals, rolls, pictures and trophies of the Volunteer Fire companies, they came into possession of the Society by gift, early in this century. The early volun-
teer companies formed an association when a paid fire department was established by the city around 1871. The quarters given them for storage and meetings were inadequate, and the city failed to make additional provision for these important records, so the collection was given to Bucks County, where existence of volunteer fire companies assured an interest in them and their safe-keeping.

Printed source materials include complete files of early Bucks County newspapers, fine copies of early editions of the Acts of the Assembly, and of the laws of Pennsylvania. There is a typescript of a work on dating old houses by Dr. Mercer, and there are several manuscripts on the Indians of Bucks County by Mrs. Harry J. Shoemaker. A long succession of scholarly presidents and librarians has been responsible for these rich collections which should prove a researcher's delight and a treasure trove of historical information well worth every effort to uncover.