

# ESTABLISHING A HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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ONE of the requisites in establishing a historical society on a sound basis is the acquisition of a safe repository for documents, books, and artifacts, as well as a suitable space for exhibits which may come into its possession. Within the limits of any county there are undoubtedly many items of historical interest and value held in private ownership. Many families possessing such objects may choose to keep them within the family circle and eventually pass them on to succeeding generations. Local experience has shown, however, that there are many such items which the owners would gladly give to a historical society if there were reasonable assurance of its protection and proper care. In the case of the Adams County Society, prior to the time that quarters were acquired in the Court House, officers and members of the organization received many offers of valuable historical items providing a place was secured for safe keeping.

Search for suitable quarters for the Society included houses which in themselves were of real historical interest. One of these was the Dobbin House in Gettysburg in which was conducted the first classical school west of the Susquehanna. Unable to raise sufficient funds with which to purchase or rent a historic house, the Society turned to the possibility of securing the aid of the County Commissioners for space in the basement of the Court House.

Commissioners can be of real aid to a Society, not only financially but also in many other ways. This body is limited by statute, however, in what it can do for either a new or long established organization. Section 437 of *The General County Law* (Harrisburg, 1945), as amended, states that "The Board of Commissioners may pay . . . a sum of two thousand dollars annually to the county historical society to assist in paying the running expenses thereof. . . ." But in the following, closely related section the legislature required of any society seeking financial aid certain

rather exacting qualifications. In this section these conditions are stated as follows:

In order to entitle any historical society to the said appropriation, the following conditions shall have been first complied with: it shall have been organized at least two years, incorporated by the proper authority, and have an active membership of one hundred or more persons, each of whom shall have paid into the treasury of said society a membership fee of at least two dollars for the support of the same; it shall hold at least two public meetings yearly, whereat papers shall be read or discussions held on historic subjects; it shall have established a museum wherein shall be deposited curios and other objects of interest and books, documents and papers relating to the history of the county or State; and it shall have adopted a constitution and a code of by-laws and elected proper officers to conduct its business.

The Adams County Society complied with these requirements in December, 1940, the final act of which was its incorporation. Instead of applying for financial aid from the Commissioners, however, the organization requested that two rooms in the basement of the Court House, which were still unfinished, be placed in condition. A room suitable for assembly use as well as for housing historical objects, and a large, fire-proof vault were thus rendered available. In the course of a few years, most of the book-shelf space was occupied by a set of Pennsylvania Archives, volumes on history and the genealogical records of Adams, York, and other adjoining counties, and numerous pamphlets. A collection of Adams County newspapers, which is the property of the Commissioners, was placed in the vault. As it was anticipated, a large number of objects of real historical value have since been received from county residents. These items were placed on exhibit in the Society rooms.

In 1949, in preparation for the observance in the following year of the County's 150th Anniversary, a movement which had been initiated by the Society, the Commissioners were requested to provide additional space, adjoining the Society rooms, for display of the many recently acquired artifacts and for a larger meeting room. Two more rooms and a spacious hallway were finished and made available for the use of the Society.

In line with the expansion of the Society's library resources, there has been a gradual increase in the use of its various records, books and newspapers by members and visitors. The organization renders a real public service by keeping the rooms open two hours each afternoon, five days a week, a service rendered possible entirely by volunteer help. The Society has chosen, thus far, to use its limited funds for the purchase of certain documents which could not otherwise be secured, and for museum and office equipment.

Over the years there has been a growing interest in the activities of the Society. Partly responsible for this interest is the regular schedule of programs on local and State history maintained through nine months of the year, two of which programs are field tours. A large part of the credit, however, for the fine standing in the community now held by the organization is due to the establishment of the Society rooms as a repository of historical objects and the subsequent collection of valuable artifacts, documents, books and genealogical records, much of it from families who now look with confidence upon the Society as a place for the safe keeping of their contributions.