FIFTY YEARS OF ACHIEVEMENT IN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY

By Robert Fortenbaugh

The organization of the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies at Harrisburg on January 5, 1905, was one of the most significant events in the history of Pennsylvania's historical interests, and the accomplishment of that day is indeed worthy of commemoration in its fiftieth anniversary year.

The establishment of historical societies was among the evidences of the birth of a concern for history and of the beginning of the achievement of an adequate historiography which marks the nineteenth century, setting it off as the most fruitful single century of historical study. Early in the century such societies were organized in Pennsylvania. They did pioneer work of the highest value on both the local and State levels, to reveal the abundant historical heritage of the Commonwealth. In their determination to preserve and exploit this heritage through stronger and more numerous organizations, they were assisted by a new surge of patriotic sentiment which began with the Civil War and increased as the time approached for celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Historical societies multiplied and reflected a widespread enthusiasm for learning more about the history of local communities, counties, and the State and nation. This was particularly notable in Pennsylvania, where great progress was made in promoting historical interest, especially through the societies.

The leaders of the more influential societies began to feel, however, that a fuller realization of their purposes was hindered when they worked alone without the inspiration and assistance which comes from close cooperation. They determined to do something about it. On November 19, 1904, an invitation was issued

*An address delivered at the forty-eighth annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies, May 7, 1955. Dr. Robert Fortenbaugh is Professor of History at Gettysburg College, past president of the Association, and author of a number of historical works.
by Dr. John W. Jordan, Librarian of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Dr. F. R. Dieffenderffer, Secretary of the Lancaster Historical Society; Boyd Crumrine, Esq., of the Washington County Historical Society; the Honorable James A. Beaver, President of the Pennsylvania German Society; and Luther R. Kelker, of the Dauphin County Historical Society. They invited various historical societies in Pennsylvania "to appoint two or more delegates to a meeting to be held at Harrisburg on January 5, 1905, for the purpose of forming an association of said various Historical Societies and to discuss 'the best means of collecting the bibliographical data concerning the publications of the respective Societies and individuals relating to the History of Pennsylvania.'"

Twenty-nine delegates "appeared in the room of the Historical Society of Dauphin County, Harrisburg, Pa., January 5, 1905, at 2 o'clock," representing the following twelve societies (as listed in the report): The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Lancaster County Historical Society, the Washington County Historical Society, the Pennsylvania German Society, the Dauphin County Historical Society, the Lebanon County Historical Society, the Chester County Historical Society, the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society, the Schuylkill County Historical Society, the Berks County Historical Society, and the Hamilton Library Association of Carlisle.

Dr. Jordan, who was made temporary chairman, expressed his thanks for the honor of presiding, and briefly stated his views as to the scope, or field of activity, which an association of historical societies in the state should cover. Thomas L. Montgomery, State Librarian, discussed the necessity of such a state association, and submitted a number of practical suggestions. On motion, these remarks by Mr. Montgomery "were adopted as a good expression of the end for which this Association should strive." On further motion, it was ordered that two committees be appointed, one on organization, and the other to gather the material for a checklist of the papers and publications of the societies for the year 1904, to be inserted in the State Librarian's Report.

The Committee on Organization, with James M. Lamberton as chairman, presented a brief report calling for an informal organization of the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies. The
The report was adopted, and the following officers were elected: President, John W. Jordan; Vice-Presidents, Gilbert Cope, Joseph H. Dubbs, and Horace Edwin Hayden; Secretary, Samuel P. Heilman; and Treasurer, Benjamin M. Nead.

The Committee on Bibliographical Data was appointed with Mr. Montgomery as chairman. There was a general discussion of the scope of this committee's work. It was determined that its responsibility should not be limited merely to the purpose stated, but that it should also act as a promotion committee for the organization.

The period from 1905 to 1913, following the Federation's organization, was a period of beginnings of organized effort on the part of individuals and agencies devoted to the study of Pennsylvania history. Before 1905, the only general agency contributing at all to this objective was the State Library, including the Division of Public Records, for its annual reports had contained historical bibliographies, check-lists, and similar matter. The year 1905 is also notable for another beginning, since it was the year of the foundation of the State Museum. It is not without significance that the Governor then in office, Samuel W. Pennypacker, was himself a well-known student of Pennsylvania history and President of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

At the next annual meeting of the Federation, a committee was appointed to draft a constitution and by-laws. These were adopted at the meeting in 1907 when twenty-eight member societies were reported. Thus the Federation was fully organized and well-launched on its work of leadership and inspiration which has continued through the years. It has been in mutual encouragement, mutual inspiration, mutual helpfulness, the quiet exercise of suggestion and—at times—of influence, and in friendly rivalry, rather than in more tangible products, that the Federation has provided fifty years of useful service.

Article II, "Object," of the completed constitution aids in appreciating the vision of the founders. We may rejoice in the manner in which so many of these objectives have been realized.

The object of the Federation shall be the advancement of historical research relating to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, local and general.

1 He was not present.
1. By the preparation of check-lists of publications, and the collection of material for a complete bibliography of the Commonwealth.

2. By the encouragement of historical activity in each county of the Commonwealth, and the formation of local historical societies.

3. By the establishment of a central agency for the exchange of duplicate historical material.

4. By the annual publication of a list of historical papers relating to the Commonwealth, and a list of the historical production of Pennsylvanians.

5. By the encouragement of the preservation of the manuscript records of the Commonwealth, and each subdivision thereof, and of the publications of such records, when possible.

The broader view and the broader program had been pioneered unofficially by the Federation. The next major development was the establishment of an official agency, the Pennsylvania Historical Commission, created by an act approved by Governor Tener on July 25, 1913. The Act entrusted the Commission “with the duty of marking and preserving the antiquities and historical landmarks of Pennsylvania.” It stated that the Commission “may, upon its own initiative or upon the petition of municipalities or historical societies, mark by proper monuments, tablets or markers, places or buildings, within this Commonwealth, where historical events have transpired, and may arrange for the care and maintenance of such markers or monuments.” It was given power to contract with local governmental units, historical societies or other associations for the maintenance of historical buildings and monuments as a consideration for the assistance of the Commission in erecting, restoring, and preserving them. The Commission was also given power to receive gifts or bequests of relics or other articles of historical interest, to be deposited in the State Museum; and to accept gifts and bequests of money for the endowment of its work.

Governor Tener appointed and commissioned the following members of the Pennsylvania Historical Commission on November 26, 1913: William C. Sproul, Chester; Hampton L. Carson, Philadelphia; William H. Stevenson, Pittsburgh; George P. Donehoo, Coudersport; and W. U. Hensel, Lancaster. At the organization meeting on March 21, 1914, Mr. Sproul was elected chair-
man, and Thomas L. Montgomery, the State Librarian, was elected curator. The Governor, in approving the bill, had cut the appropriation for the biennium from $40,000 to $10,000. The Commission, therefore, decided not to employ a permanent clerk but to hire only such clerical and stenographic help as might be required for Mr. Montgomery, who volunteered to give his services without additional salary. In view of the reduced appropriation, the Commission concluded that "its preliminary work must be largely one of inquiry, report and recommendation; and the stimulation of local effort toward the preservation of historic landmarks and their significance." It was therefore resolved to conduct a survey in which the emphasis was upon the historic monuments already erected, by whatever sponsor, in order to determine the conditions under which monuments had been placed and were maintained, and to make regulations for future grants of funds from the Commonwealth.

In the second period in the story of organized historical activity in the Commonwealth, from 1913 to 1933, the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies continued to promote statewide public interest, and the Pennsylvania Historical Commission in a very limited way contributed to the same end. "The Plan and Scope of the Commission" had been presented in its first report, with concluding sentences which proved to be prophetic of the work of the Commission in its first twenty years:

Pennsylvania historians have been too modest, or too much fascinated by the mere glitter of the wonderful industrial development of the State, to give just credit to the tremendous moral force which the State and its people have exercised in the development of the American nation. We must call attention to the facts of our history. We must make known these facts by monuments and markers, as well as by books and essays.

Except for the erection of markers and monuments, this second period was not notable in the promotion of the study and illustration of Pennsylvania history, and yet it cannot be considered fruitless. The Federation and its constituent societies became stronger in membership, resources, and holdings. Tangible evidence of this were the buildings erected, the professional staff enlargements, and the magnificent collections gathered. Pennsylvania
history began to find a place in the curricula of both undergraduate and graduate departments in colleges and universities, and even in some larger high schools. Appropriations for the work of the Historical Commission were considerably enlarged, and at least beginnings were made in historical work other than marking sites, as well as in archaeological projects. But, aside from the extensive marking program, the period may still best be characterized as the darkness before the dawn.

In the third period, beginning about 1933 and continuing to the present, the task of the reviewer becomes more difficult. What follows is, therefore, an interested participant's understanding of what has been achieved in the promotion of Pennsylvania's historical interests through the past two decades, without the detail which everything mentioned may fully deserve.

The most significant development in the 1930's was the Commission's "new look." One of the most useful and forward-looking members of the Commission wrote in 1936:

It has reshaped and revised its objectives in a desire to make the state history-conscious, to create a realization that all social and economic progress develops more easily and normally as it is demonstrated to be the outgrowth of historical precedents. . . . With this objective . . . in mind, the Commission plans to foster the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies and by direct cooperation with these local societies and those with a state-wide scope, secure a state-wide program towards this end. It is hoped that in the near future the Commission will serve as the clearing-house for all Pennsylvania historical interests.

"Out-door" objectives were still most apparent at the beginning of this period, but shortly—especially as funds became available from Federal relief agencies—activities were multiplied and diversified. In 1937 the Commission appointed a "Historian," who soon became also the Secretary of the Federation, and shortly thereafter "State Historian." Assistants were employed and publications began to pour forth—fruits of certain significant celebrations and of the W. P. A. projects. Historical parks and buildings were added to the Commission's responsibilities, and in 1940 an executive secretary was appointed. By 1941 the volume of
publication under the auspices of the Commission was extensive and varied, materials for these publications coming from the Federal projects and from independent research, now encouraged by promise of Commission support. An attractive series of radio programs was prepared and broadcast, and the State Council of Defense designated the Commission to collect and preserve materials related to Pennsylvania's part in World War II.

Contrary to what many feared, the war was not a hindrance but rather a stimulus to historical work and activities as a patriotic contribution. This was expressed, in one way, by the promotion of the Junior Historian program. Renewed interest was taken in the preservation and improvement of historical shrines which were used to recall the services and sacrifices of past generations, and this point was also emphasized in newspaper releases and a series of pamphlets for popular and school use.

In 1945 legislation was enacted to expand the Pennsylvania Historical Commission into the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, with administration of the Archives Division and the State Museum added to the original functions, and with the membership increased to ten. The new agency went into "high gear," with much larger appropriations and an expanded program of activities representing multiplied objectives. An extensive roadside, town, and city marker program was put into operation. The publication program was enlarged with special emphasis on the publication of primary source materials; and, notably, the microfilming and photographic recording of Pennsylvania sources in far-flung depositories served as encouragement and aid to research. The promise of 1936 was truly being realized: the Commission was a clearing-house, but it was more—it was a leader in all things, for all the people, in the promotion of the study and appreciation of Pennsylvania history.

Governmental agencies other than the Commission played their parts in this new era of Pennsylvania history. The Federal relief programs provided funds and personnel beyond the wildest dreams of earlier day, first through the Civil Works Administration with its Survey of Historical Source Material in Pennsylvania, under the direction of the Archives Division of the State Library in 1933-1934; and then through the Work Projects Administration and the National Youth Administration until 1943. A multitude
of historically valuable W. P. A. projects, among them the Pennsylvania Historical Records Survey, the Frontier Forts and Trails Survey, the Pennsylvania Writers’ Project, the Maritime Statistics Project, the Fort Augusta Project, and the Museum Extension Division, were sponsored by the Commission, by local societies, and by the Department of Public Instruction; and most of them were eventually consolidated in the Pennsylvania Historical Survey, which lasted until W. P. A. projects came to an end in 1943. As the consolidated program drew to a close, it was in many instances not possible to maintain even a skeleton organization to complete tasks, some of which were on the verge of completion. The work was generally valuable, and not all that remained unfinished when W. P. A. ended has remained without attention. Most of the research files passed to the Commission as sponsor, and the results of the work have thus been preserved for possible future use.

This unusual opportunity to apply great funds and large working forces was largely responsible for the general enthusiasm throughout the Commonwealth for historical activity. It was probably most responsible for inspiring these words in 1938, from one who was in the central position of all this activity:

It is doubtful if there ever was a year in which there was displayed more enthusiasm in historical work, more time and energy devoted to historical activity, and more money expended for historical programs than has been true in Pennsylvania during the past year.

In this period the Federal government also aided by expanding activities in its established responsibilities in Pennsylvania, and also added Hopewell Village and the Independence Hall project which is now approaching completion. Its historical services were enlarged in the areas under the National Park Service in Pennsylvania. State agencies in general became more historically minded than ever before, and either by cooperation with other agencies or on their own responsibility contributed much to enrich the historical program. The Departments of Highways, Forests and Waters, Commerce, Public Instruction, and Internal Affairs made important contributions.

There is no reason for thinking, however, that the activities and
achievements of the 1930's were solely the consequence of increased governmental contribution. This was also a fruitful period for non-governmental organizations of various kinds. Some of the work accomplished may have had inspiration and aid from public sources, but a great deal was the natural result of private interest which would have come about even without the great increase in official activity.

One of the most valuable of all these private ventures may be credited to this period, although it began before 1933. The Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey, sponsored by the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and the University of Pittsburgh with funds supplied by the Buhl Foundation, was the most ambitious program ever undertaken in Pennsylvania under private auspices. The work was professionally directed and staffed, and valuable results took form in an extensive publishing program, and in the inspiration of a continued heightening of activity in historical interests in the Pittsburgh area.

The past two decades have seen such a multitude of publications, and so many of high quality, that it is only with great reluctance that details are omitted here. They came not only from the results of the surveys and studies made, but also from the results of individual research. There has been more incentive for writing when publication was more likely than ever before. The two university presses, Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania, did well in producing and distributing their product. The University of Pittsburgh Press is truly impressive in its listing; that of the University of Pennsylvania published a number of historical works, the most distinctive being the *Pennsylvania Lives* series. In the past twenty years local societies have published as never before, some issuing periodical publications of merit, others sending forth pamphlets or books at irregular intervals. Many publish in the form of proceedings, and some regularly issue yearbooks. To the grand old quarterly, *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, has been added the younger but very vigorous quarterly, *Pennsylvania History*. Folklore studies have appeared to meet a widespread demand; and archeological publications, periodical and special, have made a fine contribution to a fuller understanding of our past. The Commission has made an inestimable contribution in publishing doctoral dissertations which have gone
to the roots of certain more or less neglected phases of our history.

The study of Pennsylvania history in schools and colleges, under requirements which were set up in this period, has enlarged the number of people who read and know something of their heritage. It has also called forth publication of textbooks and other aids for the study and teaching of the subject. Of these only a beginning has been made, but a beginning which has great promise.

The constituent historical societies in the Federation have been more flourishing and more productive in this period than ever before, and especially those of larger scope. Significantly, the beginning of the period saw the establishment of a new state-wide organization of individual members—the Pennsylvania Historical Association, which was another aspect of the new era. In the general field of the history of the Commonwealth, the Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania has maintained a position of strength; the Society for Pennsylvania Archeology has been reorganized and greatly strengthened; the Pennsylvania German Society has gone on its quiet but effective way; and the folklore societies have had a stronger appeal in these days when folklore commands widespread interest, through folk festivals and other ways of informing the public of this intriguing and important phase of historical understanding.

Celebrations of anniversaries of historical interest are to be considered among the most effective means of preserving and disseminating knowledge of our historical heritage, particularly from the point of view of the general public. In the past fifty years the celebration of anniversaries of significant historical events has become a fixed part of the American pattern, almost “standard procedure” in all aspects of life. Although we are concerned here primarily with Pennsylvania history, historical connections cannot be separated categorically. When the sesquicentennial anniversaries relating to the founding of the nation were celebrated in the twenties, the national and state connections could not be separated, nor indeed was the local significance overlooked. In the past two decades celebrations of anniversaries have played an impressive part in Pennsylvania. Consider the beneficial results of the Tercentenary of the Coming of the Swedes, in research, in publication, in the placing of commemorative markers, in schol-
Early and popular addresses at public meetings. A multitude of people to whom this early period had been relatively unknown, and who had little or no interest in it, were made familiar with the meaning and the essential facts of the story of New Sweden. The celebrations centering around the two hundredth anniversaries of events of the French and Indian War have already done much to enhance our appreciation of the history of those days, and will do more before the end of this decade.

So it is with publications. No one can measure the effects of any printed work, be it serious monograph or popular re-telling of incidents or events; be it novel, poem, or descriptive and pictorial work. This is emphatically true of many a publication of the past twenty years.

It is the same with our shrines and museums, whether publicly or privately owned and conducted. In this realm of historical demonstration Pennsylvania is eminently rich, and most of these material memorials of our historic past have either been established in the past half century or developed to their point of present value in the past quarter century. Who can go to Pennsbury, to Ephrata, to Wheatland, to the museum at 1300 Locust Street in Philadelphia, to the Daniel Boone Homestead, to Old Economy, to the Stephen Foster Memorial, to the Pennsylvania Farm Museum of Landis Valley, to the State Museum, to the museums of the historical societies of Berks, York and Bucks counties, to Valley Forge, to Fort Necessity, or follow the Sullivan Trail—without a thrill and at least some little instruction? To these may be added literally hundreds of historic spots: the field of Brandywine; a pioneer venture, the Union Canal Tunnel; an aboriginal location, Tioga Point; a famous building, the Wills House; the first church, Gloria Dei. History is learned from these, too, and knowledge of this history has been made more available in these last two decades. This was a great period, the best part of a half century of satisfying achievement.

There is much to which we may look forward. The future is promising, because of the labor and devotion of uncountable men and women who have contributed in the past fifty years to a notable achievement in Pennsylvania history.