OUR PENNSYLVANIA HERITAGE,
YESTERDAY AND TOMORROW

BY PHILIP S. KLEIN*

IT IS a pleasure for me to greet you tonight, and to have an opportunity to talk to you for a little while. You have our genial Program Chairman to thank or blame for my appearance, for he held me to the letter of our Association law which requires that each President must, at sometime during his tour of office, address the annual dinner. Since this is my last day of office, Dick Williams made sure that I would stay within the law, if only by hours. Presidents seem to have been running into trouble with the law recently, so I am comforted that this is my swan song rather than an inaugural address.

My theme is the past and the future of Pennsylvania history. Many of you know that this is our birthday. The year 1957 marks the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, and because of this I think it will be worthwhile to refresh our memory on the aims and achievements of the past and to set up a few targets for the future.

This organization was conceived and brought to life at two meetings in 1932 at which our founders planned a constitution, developed a convention program, and discussed the publication of a Journal. I cannot name all of those who attended these initial meetings, but let me at least mention a few: Arthur C. Bining, Julian P. Boyd, J. F. Brougher, Solon J. Buck, Frances Dorrance, Wayland Dunaway, Robert Forlenbaugh, Paul W. Gates, Lawrence H. Gipson, A. Boyd Hamilton, Burke M. Hermann, Asa E. Martin, Roy F. Nichols, John W. Oliver, Hiram H. Shenk, Ernest L. Spofford, Ross Pier Wright, and others—a group of founders whom we would expect to build soundly and with care.

*Presidential Address, delivered at the Annual Convention of the Pennsylvania Historical Association in Philadelphia, October 18, 1957, by Dr. Philip S. Klein of the History Department of Pennsylvania State University.
Our active life began with the first convention at Bethlehem in the spring of 1933, where 289 charter members were enrolled and Dixon Ryan Fox proved to us at dinner that the art of oratory still lived gloriously.

By January, 1934, the first issue of PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY was published. And here, as a memorial, I think I ought to remind you that we have had two distinct first issues of our Journal. The very first is a little article by J. Russell Ferguson on Albert Gallatin which bears the date August, 1933, and the imprint of the Association as its "Publication No. 1." Volume one, number one, of the Journal as we now know it was published under the capable editorship of Dr. Bining in January, 1934. We honor these devoted scholars who initiated our publication series, and whose work has been embedded in the history of this Association since its inception.

The new organization nourished hopes and laid plans some of which have fallen by the wayside, while others have developed into sturdy growth. Our annual meetings have accomplished much of value. By convening at a different place each year they have stimulated historical interest in many localities. They have given to those of us who have attended regularly some first-hand knowledge of historical sites, activities, and opportunities in every corner of the Commonwealth. They have produced in the programs a body of knowledge, much of which has been printed and disseminated not only within the state, but to libraries in nearly every state of the Union, and to many countries in Europe and South America. Less tangible, but just as important, these sessions have contributed to friendship and cooperation between groups of similar basic purpose, but of very different immediate function and method.

Attendance at successive meetings has brought leaders of the local societies, of the Historical Commission and its staff, and the teachers of history to a first name basis and opened the door to frank discussion and mutual help. I only wish that we had as members a larger portion of the high school teachers, and I entertain as a hope for the future the idea of bringing to our meetings each year at least one representative of the social science teachers in the public schools from each county of the state.

But there is another group which I have always wished to
see more significantly represented in our state organization and in all of the local historical societies, a group which has come increasingly to my attention in the classes in Pennsylvania History which I have been conducting since 1941. I mean the descendants of families who have come to Pennsylvania since 1865. They are decidedly interested and actively curious, often more so than the descendants of colonial stock who already know much of their state and local heritage.

Historical societies properly take a certain pride in the antiquity of the lineage of their membership in the locality, which is natural because these people know the old traditions by direct transfer from parent to child. This, however, is the one group which already knows most about the very things which it is the business of a historical society to discover, retain, and communicate to the uninformed.

Historical societies could not exist without them, for they provide the initiative, the documentary collections, the museum exhibits, and knowledge of the experience of the community which is in fact their family experience. The historical societies need them more than they need the societies, for they would know their own tradition anyway, but without the old families the historical societies would have neither collections nor a direct human link with the distant past.

Yet it is the descendants of families who have arrived here since 1865 who most need to know the local background. The newer families hold national, racial, and religious traditions of their own, most of which were unknown or at least not considered important in Pennsylvania prior to the Civil War, but which today are of commanding influence, if only because of the great numbers of persons who hold them. It is difficult to identify precisely whom we mean when speaking of newcomers since 1865, but we may be sure that they include such substantial parts of our population as those whose heritage is Italian, or Greek, or Russian, or Polish, or Lithuanian, or Catholic, or Jewish, or Negro, to name only a few from a long list.

Now I think it would be the wildest fantasy to assume that an Italian whose family arrived in Philadelphia in 1890 would voluntarily come to a historical society meeting with the idea of exchanging his rich tradition of 2,000 years for the tradition
of a Scotch-Irish family which had arrived here in 1720. I suspect that the Italian might gladly share his ideas about tradition with others of the vicinity who were interested, and if the interested persons happened to be descendants of one who had come to Philadelphia with William Penn, I am certain that the Italian would find much he considered of value in the contact, and might adjust his values a little to incorporate some of the new ideas he had discovered. But he would certainly not give up his own tradition for the other—at least, I hope not, for I believe that a tradition or a heritage is cumulative, like a cathedral, built by successive generations of a variety of materials, and is not something to be traded in as a unit, like a used car, for a new model.

The first settlers and their descendants built the foundation of this cathedral of tradition, and upon it the growing community should continue to build, but we must recognize that those who come later must add to the foundation, and alter the appearance of the structure continually. They will not be satisfied to live in the foundation. It is the business of the historical societies in each community and state to see that the new traditions are built on the old foundation, rather than set up anywhere as separate, conflicting, and competitive structures of civic purpose.

Consider these facts for a moment. There are at present about 200 Catholics in Pennsylvania for every Quaker. There are about 200 Jews for every Amishman. There are more Negroes in Pennsylvania now than the entire population of the state in 1800, and more Negroes than the total membership of any Protestant Church. There are as many citizens of Pennsylvania today whose fathers or mothers were born abroad as the total population of the state during the Civil War. The Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, the German church people, and the Plain Sects, all rolled into one, would now count only a little more than one person in ten of our present 10,000,000 Pennsylvanians. I give these rough figures to impress upon your minds the tremendous number of our fellow citizens who can never learn from their families anything of Pennsylvania's heritage before 1865. It is for these people, if for anyone, that our historical societies exist; they need us, and we have both the opportunity and the obligation to serve them. They do not know where the foundation is,
and our societies know little of what they are building. The newer citizens are our neighbors, our civic equals at the ballot box, and the present creators, whether by intent or not, of the ever growing Pennsylvania heritage. The older families, the historical societies, and the historians must either find means to pass along knowledge of the original Pennsylvania tradition to eager and earnest newcomers of every race and previous nationality, and incorporate what they have to add to it, or be prepared to see the colonial tradition replaced by a variety of new ones, which belong to a numerical majority and develop without unity or direction.

This problem, I think, is the primary challenge of the next 25 years for the Pennsylvania Historical Association. It is a grave problem, not merely of local, but of national and international import. What is going on at Little Rock is a crystal-clear example of failure to solve it. I have no faith at all in forced segregation, and very little in strained integration, but I would like to see some trial of voluntary congregation. This field of experiment is peculiarly the province of the historian at the local level. If William Penn has left us any immediately applicable tradition, it is that people of various national origin, race, and creed can live in good faith and understanding with each other; and if the later history of Pennsylvania has left us any opportunity, it is conspicuously that of a region inhabited by such a heterogeneous population that the experimental ground is here already laid out. We have broken the sound barrier, and the heat barrier, and now the space barrier—why can't we make a dent on the common sense barrier?

I believe that intelligent representatives of all these groups, in proportion to their numerical strength, could find in simple historical curiosity about each other, a common scholarly and civic interest, and that this could start quietly and unobtrusively in every community within the confines of its historical society. In many places it already has. Such a representative group, because it is wholly voluntary and because it seeks a common goal, could be of towering influence in every community where it existed. You can wake me up now, for I'm dreaming—but I like the dream.

The story of our publications program in the past quarter
century accentuates what I have been trying to say. Our Journal, Pennsylvania History, has thus far published about 350 major articles. About 50 of these have dealt with professional mechanics—teaching methods, bibliography, and editorial exhortation something on the order of my talk tonight.

The other 300 are the more usual research productions dealing with the personalities and events of Pennsylvania history. I was curious to know just what kind of material we had offered which might be of particular interest to Pennsylvanians whose families had come here since 1865, and decided to classify the articles, using the customary breakdown by time periods: the colonial era to 1776; the middle period from the Revolution to the end of the Civil War; and the modern period, since 1865. It first struck me forcibly that these periods now are of about equal length—about ninety years each. This surprised me, for it seemed odd to contemplate, for example, that Simon Cameron was a full thirty years closer to being a contemporary of Ben Franklin than I am to being a contemporary of Simon Cameron.

But as to the magazine, here are the results. Fifty-four per cent of the articles described colonial times; events of our first ninety years. Forty-five and a half per cent portrayed events of the second ninety years between Independence and Appomattox. One half of one per cent—or fifteen articles—related Pennsylvania's activities in the most recent ninety-two years of our history, and one half of these were written by the same person, our good and esteemed friend, S. K. Stevens. This means that the rest of the Association and all its varied contributors have devoted exactly one quarter of one per cent of their total research effort to the experiences of this Commonwealth of 10,000,000 souls during the past one hundred years, and ninety-nine and three quarters per cent of their effort to what happened before the state's population exceeded the 3,000,000 mark. This, to me, was astounding, and suggested excessive pre-occupation with the foundation.

Editors, of course, cannot print what is not submitted; historical societies cannot work with family records which have not been donated, or house institutional files which now come by the warehouseful instead of in a grocery carton. College professors are loath to assign student apprentices to a job where the raw
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material is inaccessible or else so vast and complex that the professor himself cannot make head or tail of it. Frankly, I think the culprit is a very simple one; we are all reluctant to admit how old we are getting and how fast time is flying by. We do not want, just yet, to include our fathers and grandfathers as part of the documentary record of history.

Regardless of causes, the resulting fact is simple. Pennsylvania historians know almost nothing about their state since the end of the Civil War, and do not seem to be doing very much about it. You all know that this Association has long had as one of its cherished goals the preparation of a comprehensive history of the Commonwealth. We could do a good job on it up to 1865 right now, for the monographic material is at hand, but I doubt that anyone will be able to get very far on the last third until a generation of basic research has been done.

Lest you think that the gap I mention exists only in our own Journal, let me add that in the general bibliography, *Writings on Pennsylvania History*, edited a decade ago by Dr. Bining, about 1,000 entries appear for the recent century of our history, but only 50 of these are the products of any historical society—again one half of one per cent. The rest are mostly current events reports from government and trade journals. It would be wearisome to continue further when I am sure that the meaning of this rapid survey is perfectly clear.

If we cherish any part of the older Pennsylvania tradition, we must recognize that we have a multiple responsibility. Merely to repeat additional details of the colonial story will not preserve the meaning of William Penn, and to devote twenty out of twenty-one ethnic studies to the English Quaker, Scotch-Irish Presbyterian, and German church trilogy, as we have done, will not inspire much enthusiasm among present day Baptists or Catholics who, believe it or not, have a few traditions and peculiarities, too. They will build their own hall of tradition unless we can find ways to persuade them to add to the earlier one.

I think our task is threefold.

1) We must in all our various societies try to collect material from and study the traditions of our late-arrival Pennsylvanians. Their heritage, which they know and zealously preserve, is now
an important part of our whole tradition and is more apparent and perhaps more influential today than the foundation laid by William Penn.

2) We must encourage scholarly representatives of the many groups who have come during the past century to participate more in the work of local and state historical organizations. They need an invitation and, if my experience while Secretary of the Association is any clue, they will respond enthusiastically.

3) We must write increasingly of the years since 1865 in order to learn what we now do not know: the aspect and shape of the Pennsylvania tradition of today.

We have recently been celebrating the 275th anniversary of the landing of William Penn on these shores. Let us imagine Mr. Penn being now escorted into this banquet hall and seating himself with quiet decorum at your table. “Tell me, friend,” he might inquire, “what has been the history of my Holy Experiment here in Pennsylvania during the last century?” I sincerely hope that at the 50th birthday of this Association, which happily will coincide with the tercentenary of Penn’s landing, we can answer him with certainty and assurance. He would have gloried in the opportunity we now have. Let us face it as he would have wished.