THE PUBLIC RECORDS AND HISTORICAL PROGRAM OF PENNSYLVANIA

By S. W. Higginbotham*

It is my purpose to speak briefly on the program of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission as it relates to "Archives and Publications." Although the emphasis of the Institute has been on "Rediscovering Our Resources," I have assumed that the scope of my topic is broader than a mere cataloging of the manuscript or published research materials in the possession of the Commission; and I propose rather to describe the functions of the Bureau of Research, Publications, and Records as they relate to historical work in the field of Pennsylvania history.

The Bureau as such is a relative newcomer to the Commission, but the functions it discharges have a longer history. The Division of Public Records began in 1903 as the archives division of the State Library; and the Division of Research and Publications is the direct descendant of the Historical Division which had its beginnings in the old Pennsylvania Historical Commission in 1937. Eight years later, the archives and historical divisions were included along with the State Museum and the various historical properties in the present Historical and Museum Commission. The establishment of the two existing Divisions in the Bureau was accomplished in 1956 as a means of facilitating the administration of these two closely related groups.

The Division of Public Records from a statutory point of view has exceedingly broad powers and obligations, comprehending in the words of the Administrative Code of 1929 the preservation of "all public records throughout the Commonwealth"; the ex-

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examining of "the condition of the records, books, pamphlets, documents, manuscripts, archives, maps, and papers kept filed or recorded in the several offices of the departments, boards, or commissions of the Commonwealth and of the counties, cities, and boroughs of the State"; and the recommending of "action to be taken by the persons having the care and custody of public records as may be necessary to secure their safety and preservation, and to cause all laws relating to public records to be enforced." Needless to say, the Division, because of its small staff and the fact that its control of records is limited by the authority of other agencies, by no means exercises all the powers granted in the Code.

Essentially, the activities of the Division at the present time are twofold: 1) the control along with the Executive Board of the destruction of noncurrent records in the state agencies; and 2) the preservation of noncurrent public records having historical value. It is this last function which is of particular interest today. The Division is the official depository for the historically valuable public records of the Commonwealth not in current use, and it has the associated duties of collecting, classifying, preserving, and making them usable for reference and research. In addition to these public records, the Division likewise has a limited number of private documentary collections donated to it and a collection of microfilm copies of valuable Pennsylvania material in other depositories.

It would be a happy privilege to be able to assure you that you would find in the Division of Public Records the complete archives of the Commonwealth since the days of William Penn, but such is not my good fortune. Until the establishment of the archives in 1903, no single agency of the Commonwealth had the responsibility for the care of such records, and there was the inevitable attrition resulting from theft or other private appropriation, mutilation by autograph hunters, improper storage, and destruction by accident or by custodians unappreciative of their worth. There is the further consideration that the papers of the proprietors, though obviously governmental in nature, were held by the Penn family after the Revolution. Fortunately, the proprietary papers have been purchased by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania; and ultimately many other missing public documents likewise came to rest there, in the American Philosophical Society, or in other
depositories, so that they are well preserved and available to scholars even if physically scattered.

Despite these losses, the Division of Public Records has a wealth of historical documents of great value to the historian. Here are to be found the original Penn Charter, the First Frame of Government, most of the Indian deeds, the minutes of the Provincial Council, and a large body of other papers relating to the government of the Province and the Commonwealth. There are military records covering the Revolution and the subsequent wars up to the Civil War, with some records relating to that conflict. There are large quantities of papers relating to internal improvements such as roads, canals, and bridges; there is much on political patronage, on state buildings, and on such state institutions as the prisons. The Baynton-Wharton-Morgan and the John Nicholson Papers, sequestered by the Commonwealth, are in the Division, and they throw much light on land speculation, western trade, and Indian relations. The private papers are widely varied, but you can find in them small collections of the letters of Governors Bigler and Geary, of President Buchanan, of Vice President Dallas, and of many others less prominent.

The microfilm collection also has much of value. There are the manuscript federal census returns from 1830 to 1880; a large body of wills, deeds, tax lists, and other material for twelve counties dating from 1682 to 1850; and the 61 reels of Pennsylvania material from the Microfilm Collection of Early State Records compiled by the Library of Congress and the University of North Carolina.

Here, then, is a real treasure for those doing research in the history of Pennsylvania. Many of these records have had to be stored away from the main office because of the crowded space in which the Division operates; and the arranging of the documents and the preparation of finding aids has not kept pace with the continuous influx of new materials. Nevertheless, given sufficient advance notice of your needs, Henry H. Eddy, chief of the Division, and his staff can have the materials you want available and provide suggestions for their use. The staff is always willing to help in any way possible, but it cannot, of course, undertake to do the research itself.

The Commission is now preparing a brief description of its collections of original and photographed historical materials, which
will list the major holdings of the Division of Public Records in addition to those in the Division of Research and Publications and at Old Economy and the Drake Museum. The Division of Public Records has also begun a series of Information Leaflets to explain the nature of its services and resources. Two of these are now in print and are available for those who would like copies.²

Although the great volume of the research materials of the Commission are in the Division of Public Records, there are large and significant bodies of original and photographed materials held by the Division of Research and Publications. Of greatest value are the microfilmed and photostated materials. Most of these had their origin in special appropriations of the General Assembly in 1947 and 1949. Using this money, Dr. S. K. Stevens, State Historian, and Donald H. Kent, present chief of the Division, set out to acquire photographic copies of Pennsylvania documents in the depositories of other states and Canada and likewise to build up a collection of county newspapers from the earliest date to about 1900. They also arranged to make photographic copies of important papers held by private individuals both within and outside the Commonwealth. In recent years, the Commission has had no special appropriations to carry on this project, but it has continued to add to its holdings with the funds which are available.

No brief summary can do justice to the wealth of historical materials in this photographic collection, but a fairly complete description will be included in the guide now under preparation. For those who wish more immediate details, there is a reprint of an article by Mr. Kent which describes the progress made up to 1950.³ Briefly, the Commission now has on microfilm more or less complete runs up to 1900 of newspapers for 34 of the Commonwealth's 67 counties. It likewise has all the British military papers concerning Pennsylvania from 1754 to 1776, large bodies of Canadian documents on the French regime in Western Pennsylvania and on Indian relations, and a variety of letters and other documents on Pennsylvania from the Library of Congress, the Wisconsin State Historical Society, the William L. Clements Library, and some thirty other depositories in thirteen states and

² The titles are: Information and Suggestions in Answer to Genealogical Inquiries and The Military System of Pennsylvania During the Revolutionary War.
Canada. It also possesses photostats of the most significant maps of Pennsylvania from the beginning to 1835. At the present time, the Commission is engaged in preparing for microfilming a collection of some 3,500 pieces of Simon Cameron’s correspondence, which was recently discovered in the possession of the Historical Society of Dauphin County.

The existence of this vast collection of photographic materials is an evidence of the Commission’s earnest desire to preserve the documents which tell the story of Pennsylvania's historical heritage and also to further research by scholars in the field of Pennsylvania history. One of the most difficult problems, sometimes an insurmountable one, facing historians is the wide scattering of the documentary sources which makes thorough research highly expensive in travel and living costs. By accumulating these sources on film in a central location, the Commission has eliminated much of this difficulty for historians of Pennsylvania. Furthermore, the microfilm can in most cases be borrowed on interlibrary loan by competent scholars doing research. Only recently, some of our newspaper microfilms have been borrowed by a professor at the University of Florida writing on the anthracite industry in Schuylkill County, by a professor at Dartmouth investigating the Molly Maguires, and by a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh doing a thesis on the Radical Republicans in the Civil War and Reconstruction era. Our microfilm of the Contrecoeur Papers from Laval University was recently borrowed by the Public Archives of Canada for reproduction. We take a great deal of pride in serving scholarship in this fashion, and we hope that more researchers will take advantage of these valuable and now easily accessible materials.

The Division of Research and Publications also has a number of significant collections of original materials—the business papers of the Fall Brook Coal Company and the Schuylkill Navigation Company among others. It likewise is the depository of transcribed materials of the Pennsylvania Historical Records Survey and the Pennsylvania Historical Survey and of the unpublished manuscripts of the Federal Writers Project of Pennsylvania. Just recently, a man in Delaware donated to the Commission a collection of more than a thousand letters of a Democratic lawyer and politician of Armstrong County in the 1840’s and 1850’s as well as a complete file of the Kittanning Mentor, a Copperhead news-
paper published from December, 1862, to July, 1864. Only one issue of this paper is listed in Gregory’s *Union List of Newspapers.*

In addition to these materials at Harrisburg, the Commission has the great body of the Harmony Society Papers at Old Economy in Ambridge and the various collections on the early history of the oil industry in the Drake Museum at Drake Well Memorial Park near Titusville.

While the collection and preservation of these documentary materials is one of the most basic functions of the Historical and Museum Commission, it also has the responsibility of conducting historical and archaeological research and of publishing and disseminating the results of such research. Archaeological research is carried on in the Bureau of Museums, Historic Sites, and Properties. Historical research is done by the staff of the Division of Research and Publications. Necessarily, a considerable part of the staff research is done in answer to queries received from visitors or by mail. Every effort is made to provide assistance to those seeking information, though the patience of the staff is sometimes sorely tried by requests asking for “all the information you have on William Penn” or Franklin or even on Pennsylvania history. A few students apparently expect us to prepare their assignments and term papers, and a few graduate students are under the misapprehension that we are able and willing to locate and transcribe all the sources needed for their theses.

Apart from these day-to-day requests and from the work done for other Commission offices such as texts for historical markers, the research of the staff of the Division is directed to the production of its published materials and can be considered best in relation to the publication program. Among the most important research projects now in progress are those on frontier forts, the Indian trails, and on Pennsylvania Indians generally.

The publications program is broad in scope, extending on the one hand to the preparation of illustrated four-page leaflets for the historic properties and on the other to substantial volumes such as the *Bouquet Papers* and the recent *Bibliography of Pennsylvania History.* Ignoring the property leaflets, the publications

4 S. K. Stevens, Donald H. Kent, and Autumn L. Leonard (eds.), *The Papers of Henry Bouquet; II, The Forbes Expedition* (Harrisburg, 1951). This is the only volume published.

may be broadly grouped into those written for school children and the public generally and those for historical scholars. A list of the publications currently in print is available on request.

One important series is the Historic Pennsylvania Leaflets, four-page illustrated leaflets on a variety of topics such as the Pennsylvania Rifle, the Conestoga Wagon, and the Pennsylvania Canals. Sixteen titles are now in print, and others are projected. They are intended primarily for the schools and are distributed free to teachers and at a very nominal charge to students and the public at large.

Among the other pamphlets and booklets designed for popular use are Pennsylvania History in Outline, The Capitols of Pennsylvania, Conserving Pennsylvania's Historical Heritage, and the Guide to the Historical Markers of Pennsylvania. Much more needs to be done in this field, and we now have under preparation a reliable, well-written booklet on the Pennsylvania Indians. We should welcome suggestions for other pamphlets and booklets of the same nature. It should be added that the Commission has cooperated in the preparation and distribution of the six booklets published by the Pennsylvania Historical Association relating to the Germans, Quakers, and Scotch-Irish and to the oil, coal, and iron and steel industries.

Of a more scholarly nature are the Commission's books and reprints of articles from historical journals. Among the books are such aids to research as the Bibliography of Pennsylvania History, the Guide to the Published Archives of Pennsylvania, and the study of County Government and Archives in Pennsylvania. We now have in preparation a guide to the Commission's collections, as I mentioned earlier. Another research aid of a different type is the publication of source materials such as The Papers of Henry Bouquet and the Papiers Contrecœur, the last in cooperation with Laval University.

Henry Howard Eddy, Guide to the Published Archives of Pennsylvania (Harrisburg, 1949).
Fernand Grenier (ed.), Papiers Contrecœur et autres documents concernant le conflit anglo-français sur l'Ohio de 1745 à 1756 (Quebec, 1952). The Commission aided in the publication of this work by purchasing a considerable number of the books and also helped in the selection and editing of the documents. Mr. Kent has made a selection and translation of documents from this book for later publication by the Commission.
Of very great significance are the numerous books on Pennsylvania politics and on social and economic history. As a group, they constitute one of the Commission’s most important services to Pennsylvania history and Pennsylvania historical scholarship. For the most part, these are monographic studies done as doctoral dissertations. They represent thorough research in the sources and present new interpretations, but they could not have been published profitably as commercial ventures. In printing them, the Commission has made this valuable work available to all who study and read Pennsylvania history and has encouraged these scholars by insuring that the product of their years of research and writing will not lie neglected and unused in typescript on the shelves of university libraries. I am happy to announce that the Commission now has in process another of these books—a study of Pennsylvania politics from 1833 to 1848 by Charles M. Snyder.

One other feature of the Commission publication program deserves mention. The General Assembly in 1951 set up a Historical Preservation Fund into which is paid all money arising from the sale of publications and from admission fees to the historic properties. This fund can, among other things, be expended for further publication by the Commission. In a period when direct appropriations for this purpose are often severely limited, the Historical Preservation Fund does insure that publication, at least on a limited scale, can be continued. This is a matter of great comfort to the Commission staff and, we feel, to all of you who have an interest in the Commonwealth’s historical heritage.

The archives and publications program of the Commission is of fundamental importance to the advancement of Pennsylvania history: it preserves and makes available for research the public records of the Commonwealth and a large number of significant private papers; through photographic reproductions it preserves and makes accessible documents, newspapers, and maps scattered widely throughout the state and the nation; and through publications it serves students, teachers, research scholars, and the general public.

All of us at the Commission are only too well aware that our services in the fields of research and publications can be improved and expanded. Yet we take pride in our past achievements and look forward to a future of increased usefulness in carrying out our mission of “Conserving Pennsylvania’s Historical Heritage.”