PRESERVING OUR PAST

By Honorable David L. Lawrence*

WHEN I first received your kind invitation through your Program Chairman, Carl Stoner, I was impressed by three things in his letter.

First of all, the letter came to me during the third week in April, which was a considerable length of time away from your fall meetings. Second, you have kindly given me three dates from which I might choose. And third, Mr. Stoner summed up your case eloquently with one provocative paragraph.

He said—and I take the liberty of quoting from his letter: “For many years, it has been customary for the incumbent Governor to, sometime during his term, address the Dauphin County Historical Society. Your term is rapidly approaching a close, and we have not had an opportunity to hear you.”

Well, I must confess that I had not thought of the length of my Administration in those terms, exactly. But, as I paused and reflected, I could see that Mr. Stoner was absolutely right. Here I was, going into the last half of my four years as Governor, racing pell-mell, as it were, toward unemployment. I must confess, also, that there were good reasons I hadn’t taken time to contemplate that impending eventuality. I’m afraid I had been too busy.

I realize it has always been something of a tradition for Pennsylvania’s Governors to slow down a bit during the tag end of this rigidly-enforced, single-term system of ours. I hadn’t even realized that I was breaking away from a tradition—but I cannot say that I am unhappy that I have.

April happens to have been an extraordinarily hectic month. The Governor’s Committee on Education presented its final, full report and I addressed the first Annual Pennsylvania Curriculum Study Conference in an effort to stimulate better public education.

*This speech by Governor David L. Lawrence at the meeting of The Historical Society of Dauphin County, Harrisburg, October 16, 1961, is published here with the Governor’s permission. In it he discusses a number of matters of interest to Pennsylvania historians—particularly the new William Penn Memorial Building.
We welcomed former President Dwight D. Eisenhower to Pennsylvania. We dedicated a new Science Building at Temple University and I had an opportunity to describe Pennsylvania’s pioneer program in travel development with the National Association of Travel Organizations when its members met in Philadelphia.

I met with the Pennsylvania Tuberculosis and Health Society in Pittsburgh; the Citizens Action Committee in Erie; the Rotarians in Harrisburg and I addressed the Intercollegiate Conference on Government. There were conferences on urban renewal and church architecture and we kicked off a “Bonds for Jobs” campaign over in Sharon.

It was, as you can see, a month of great activity—and it was, also, one of the most enjoyable months I have ever spent. Nothing pleases me more than a schedule that allows me to see every part of Pennsylvania—for I share, with you, your love for our Commonwealth and your respect for our heritage. I have mentioned this one month in the third year of my Administration only because I wanted you to understand why I felt no symptoms of that dread disease which we have nicknamed “The Lame Duck.”

At the moment Mr. Stoner’s letter arrived, we were in the midst of a legislative session which, I firmly believe, will go down in Pennsylvania history as one of the most creative, constructive, and productive we have ever had. The work we had to do this year was far from over—even though both houses of the Assembly had looked with favor upon my general budget and they had passed the most progressive highway construction program in memory.

Although I was forced to reconsider my original agreement to be with you in September, I hope that the passage of a month’s time has not seriously curtailed my usefulness in being here. I am delighted for the opportunity—and my only regret is that we could not have met several times together, rather than once.

Throughout all my years in public affairs, I have held Pennsylvania’s many local historical societies in high esteem. I have found their members to be, almost without exception, dedicated and well-informed men and women who believe that the present has much to learn and profit from the study of the past. And, because of this belief, they are determined to preserve all that is worthwhile from our history and our heritage. In most areas of our state, they have done an admirable job. The major historic
shrines which are so much a part of our early years are still intact—thanks to the vigilance, the foresight, and the courage of hundreds of volunteers such as yourselves.

I like to think that, in a way, those who see value in the past are like the Minute Men of Revolutionary days. They are sentinels and soldiers, doing their duty to keep the corrosion of man's neglect from rotting away the foundations of our history. We have every reason to feel pride in the work they have done—for without them and the enlightened encouragement they have given to good administrators and legislators, we would not now have the Ephrata Cloister or Cornwall Furnace or the other major historical properties which have now been preserved for succeeding generations. If it were not for the enthusiasm and interest of groups such as this one, certainly, we would not have the strong and far-sighted Historical and Museum Commission which has done so much to plan for the wise use of our historic sites.

In future years, the effect of the work you have done may well be remembered most clearly, however, in the public, legislative, and administrative support you have helped to arouse for the construction of the William Penn Memorial Museum. This building is destined to become one of America's greatest tourist attractions. The artist's drawings and the architect's plans for the Museum have aroused great comment and, of course, some controversy. Any plan for any new building is bound to do that. But, in the case of the new Museum, it has become obvious that this design is by far the most practical.

Some of us, who have long felt the need for a better, more practical building in which to offer the public the opportunity to study and absorb our history, have looked forward to the construction of this new Museum with ever-mounting anticipation. I am happy and proud to be able to report to you tonight that plans and specifications for the William Penn Memorial Museum have been approved by Doctor Stevens and are now under study by the General State Authority. Following the customary analysis by the Department of Property and Supplies prior to advertising for bids, we should be ready to solicit bids from contractors within the next week or ten days. The contractors will then need about six weeks to prepare their bids and submit them. Barring some last-minute hitch along the way—and the always
threatening spectre of bad weather or technical slip-ups—we hope to break ground for the Museum in about three months.

It may seem, on the surface at least, that the Memorial Museum has been a long time coming. The years have passed by—there can be no doubt of that. It was in 1945 that the General Assembly authorized construction of the William Penn Memorial Building, but it was not until 1957 that the General State Authority actually allocated funds for the preparation of plans. The money for construction finally was allocated by the legislature in 1959, during the first year of this Administration. And now, today, we are on the threshold of watching the dream become reality.

The cost of the structure must seem sizable at first glance, for $9 million is a lot of money to spend on any building, no matter what its use may be. I cannot help feeling, however, that this $9 million will pay dividends to our Commonwealth for generations and generations to come. For this is no mere hiding place for the relics of the past—this is a building designed to give men and women and their children a living, breathing sense of history and its meaning to our present and our future. The new Museum represents a distinct departure in Pennsylvania's concept of the preservation of history—but it is not a new idea in the general field of historical conservation. Many museums, in other parts of the country, have long considered their educational values as uppermost in their planning.

In building the William Penn Memorial Museum, therefore, we are simply following accepted and proven standards of construction for the best way to present historic displays. In the new building we will have a small auditorium and classrooms for educational programs. Best of all, we will have abundant space for exhibits—a welcome departure from the cramped, poorly-lighted quarters we have been forced to use for many years. It will give us, for the first time in our history, adequate storage space for important records accumulated by the Commission. And, equally important, it will allow us to preserve the papers of Pennsylvania's Chief Executives so that they may be used for research and resource material in the years to come. The Museum can be—and it will be—an impressive and magnificent addition to Pennsylvania's educational and cultural resources.

But it will also represent a solid investment, economically, in
GOVERNOR LAWRENCE AT INDEPENDENCE HALL
the future of our state. I believe, in all sincerity, that the new William Penn Memorial Museum will become one of Pennsylvania's most treasured tourist attractions. As such, it will attract hundreds of thousands of new visitors to this area who might not have come here before.

For the truth of the matter is that Pennsylvanians—and, indeed, all Americans—have a great, ingrained respect and love for the story of our own past. They want to know more about it, but they accept it far more eagerly and easily when it is presented in a reasonably dramatic, realistic, and palatable form. This is the major advantage the new Museum will give us and our citizens. It will take history out of the musty, dark corners of another century and put it back where it belongs—before the eyes of the people so that they may learn from it, so that they may understand it and be inspired to match the greatness of those who handed it down to them.

In terms of its educational value, its cultural influence, and its economic impact, the new Museum will stand as one of the foremost achievements of our decade. I am honored and delighted that it shall have its physical beginning, at least, in my Administration.

I will consider that one more indication that this era, although brief, has been among our most profitable and provident. We are laying the groundwork for a greater Pennsylvania. . . .