View of the Memorial Hall of the William Penn Memorial Museum Building during the dedication ceremony on October 13, 1965.

Photo by Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, Pa.
OPERATION HERITAGE
A GLANCE BACKWARD AND
A LOOK FORWARD

By S. K. Stevens*

LEST my terminology confuse some of you, I hasten to say that OPERATION HERITAGE is a designation or title we dreamed up in the Commission offices about eight years ago to characterize a varied and comprehensive program which we then projected to improve the entire operation of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Frankly, the idea was borrowed largely from the new Mission 66 program then widely hailed as the advance or forward movement program of the National Park Service. Ours was an operation to advance the heritage of the Commonwealth on all Commission fronts, and hence we dreamed up this name and got out a graphic booklet to explain it to our friends and hoped-for friends as OPERATION HERITAGE.

I should like first to glance backward; in fact, all the way back to the first twenty-five years of state-supported historical activity in the Commonwealth. As most of you know, the Commission we now know by the somewhat unwieldy title of Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission was established by law in 1913 as a Pennsylvania Historical Commission and organized early in 1914. It is, therefore, just a bit more than fifty years old. Dean Roy F. Nichols has been employed to write a history of that fifty years, which he has completed with his usual ability and which will be published in a few months.

The first quarter century of the story of the Commission and its work is not very inspiring. Nor would I say that it was very different from the then pattern of state and local historical activity throughout the country in being less than sensational in its achievements. I so well remember around 1937-1940 the days when a

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few of us were organizing an American Association for State and Local History, which will celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary on October 13 to 15 in Harrisburg as well as lending a national luster to the dedication of our new William Penn Memorial Museum and Archives Building. In those days, for the most part, the amateur and the antiquarian largely dominated state and local history and the world of the museum and the archives. There were some exceptions, but not many or enough to really dwell upon. It was an era when, with the exception of a few pioneer souls of the caliber of Roy Nichols, Asa Martin, Wayland F. Dunaway, Alfred James, Arthur Bining, and a few others, the academic historian looked with at best condescension and sometimes almost with scorn upon state and/or local history. Few graduate students were directed to this field for research. A very few colleges, notably Penn State, presented a course in Pennsylvania history. It was an unknown in the public and private schools of the Commonwealth.

The original Pennsylvania Historical Commission operated through those years with a budget of a few thousand dollars, spent mainly in erecting stone boulders with bronze historical plaques. Toward the latter part of this first quarter century it got back of some archaeological activity, mainly inspired by that grand lady of our early endeavors, Miss Frances Dorrance. It was not until 1937 that the Commission published its first scholarly historical volume, Dr. Bining's *Pennsylvania Iron Manufacture in the Eighteenth Century*—without a doubt in my mind the worst-printed book ever issued in the entire field of American historiography.

The administration of George H. Earle is known as the era of Pennsylvania's Little New Deal, as the Democratic party returned to power for the first time in the century. It brought to Harrisburg a peppery and energetic man who was not always the easiest person in the world with whom to work but a man with vision and enterprise, the Philadelphia lawyer Frank W. Melvin. The Commission began to have a program and to get some money with which to implement it. Fortunately, Governor Earle had retained on his Commission that stalwart Republican from Erie, Ross Pier Wright. Two men more different in most ways than Mr. Melvin and Mr. Wright it would be hard to find on the same team at any time or any place. But they had one thing strongly
in common—a desire to make something out of this impoverished and seemingly hopelessly antiquarian Commission. They wanted it to do something more than setting boulders with bronze historical plaques and having tea parties with the D.A.R. and historical groups on such occasions.

Mr. Melvin believed the Commission ought to play an active role in conservation of historic sites and buildings and started moves which led to the acquisition of Ephrata, the Boone Homestead, and other properties, as well as the reconstruction of Pennsbury Manor—the first project of its kind in the state's history. Mr. Wright also was in favor of this and took a hand in supporting a second restoration of the flagship Niagara. But he also wanted more work in archaeology, along with more historical research and publications, as well as constructive work with the historical societies through the long dormant Federation to improve their work. It was this Commission to which a professional historian of note was first appointed in the person of Dr. Paul
Gates, then at Bucknell University. Dr. Gates left shortly for Cornell’s Cayugan Towers, but the Commission has never since the Earle administration been without a professional historian of note from the college and university group as a member. It also has continued to be a bipartisan Commission with at least one minority party member.

The year 1945 marked another turning point, when what had originated as a bill designed to rip out the former Commission, to make way for the designs of a self-seeking member who had been thwarted in dominating it, produced the present Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. The present Commission may be said to have been conceived in sin, but the result turned out to be commendable. The member of the old Commission who had engineered the deal was not reappointed and, with the exception of Miss Frances Dorrance, an entirely new Commission was appointed by Governor Martin. The first chairman was James H. Duff, who shortly became Governor, when he was replaced by Charles J. Biddle, a prominent Philadelphia attorney and direct descendant from Nicholas Biddle. Richard Norris Williams, 2nd, then director of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, was another member of note. Charles G. Webb of Wellsboro, attorney and later President Judge of Tioga County, was a member and is now back with us. Historical research and publications never had a more vigorous supporter than Judge Webb, other than possibly Ross Pier Wright and Roy F. Nichols. With Judge Webb’s help, we persuaded Governor Duff to make allocation of about $100,000 for research and publication in Pennsylvania history, which Don Kent and I always refer to as the Webb Foundation. This was continued the next four years and amounted finally to some $200,000.

It was also in 1945 that some of us began to dream about a new building, and with the aid of A. Boyd Hamilton, first president of this Association, we were able to sell the idea to Governor Edward Martin. We got money and even had an architect, but due to circumstances I do not have time to evaluate here, we lost the building and it took twenty years to recover it.

When I was given the opportunity to serve as Executive Director under Governor George M. Leader, and under Frank W. Melvin who had returned as chairman, an older and crippled man
but with just as much fire and determination as twenty years before, we decided it was time to get moving on broader fronts. We decided that we would start driving to make the Act of 1945 authorizing a William Penn Memorial Building a reality. We believed further progress in any extended program of research based on collecting Pennsylvania historical materials or the improvement of the State Archives was physically severely and permanently limited without new facilities. We realized that a
modern State Museum could be created ONLY if new facilities and staff were created. We believed that Pennsylvania shrines which were in the hands of the Commission were poorly administered and that programs for restoration and improvement had been neglected to a point where the condition of most of them was little short of shameful and a discredit to the Commonwealth.

This led us directly into OPERATION HERITAGE. It was something of a dream ten years ago, but it has become very much a reality. We have obtained in that time approximately $15,000,000 in capital funds for restoration, improvements, and new projects. This is exclusive of additional operating and maintenance monies. Of course some $9,000,000 is represented in the William Penn Memorial. We have completed the restoration of Old Economy as of July of this year. We completed last year an entirely new Drake Well Museum at Titusville. We completed the third restoration, or more accurately, the rebuilding of the flagship Niagara. We have built new orientation and small museum facilities at Pennsbury, Ephrata, Cornwall, and the Boone Homestead. We have moved ahead rapidly on the completion of the Ephrata restoration. We have made real progress in making the Pennsylvania Farm Museum at Landis Valley a first-class farm museum. We have projected a military museum at the 28th Division Shrine at Boalsburg, and it will soon be put under construction. We have completed restoration of the David Bradford house in Washington. We are working on restoration and study at Graeme Park. We have some $4,000,000 in capital funds ahead of us for the next six years, with probably $2,000,000 for the next two years. There is almost as much in process of expenditure.

The great star in our crown is of course the William Penn Memorial Museum and Archives Building. Independent judgment has assured us that we now have what most experts regard as the finest archival and historical depository setup in the country—bar none, even the National Archives—in terms of modern and well organized facilities. I am sure our Museum stands the same test as compared with other states. We are not willing to take on the Smithsonian as yet, but we know we now rank very probably at the top among state museum facilities, though it will take us a couple of years to really develop the potential. Facilities in terms of buildings demand money and we are getting some—
never quite as much as we ask for, it is true—but as of now we are running a budget of about $1 1/2 million for annual operating expenses as compared with about $900,000 for two years when we started OPERATION HERITAGE. One of the most important uses to which this money is put is more staff. The Commission program or its plans can never be any better than its professional staff and here I think we compare favorably with the finest in the nation. After some battling we have secured much improved salary levels, and the greater part of the professional staff is under permanent civil service.

Now for a little looking forward from our present position. No organization which falls into the rut of complacency and endeavors to rest upon past achievements can hope to expect to progress, and it indeed may end up by actually retrogressing. The Commission cannot and indeed MUST not become complacent. There
is always a danger of this, because we have made truly giant strides forward in some areas.

There are, however, at least two excellent reasons why we cannot cease this forward movement of our program. One is the simple fact that we now have new facilities with which to really do something constructive in every area of activity with which we are concerned. We are now in a position to push new and expansive programs to collect manuscripts and archives on a scale never before possible and to offer new services. We cannot plead lack of space as an excuse for not gathering, for example, every scrap of governors' papers we can locate—and we already have secured the monumental collection of Daniel Hastings. Furthermore, we must redouble our efforts to cooperate with other institutions. We must push the USE of these materials by students and scholars, because at long last we have the working space and facilities to serve these people. We want to make every historian or would-be historian and every student of Amer-
ican history aware of what we have and that it is in Harrisburg available for their ready use. This is an obligation. We already are cooperating with the National Historical Publication Commission on microfilming major Pennsylvania source materials.

We have never had in Pennsylvania the semblance of a decent State Museum, and now we have the facilities and are building the staff to do a job—not just to sit in offices and congratulate ourselves on what a magnificent facility we have. Our obligation is to do something with it. Pennsylvania schools have been crying for museum services which have never been provided. Groups in the world of art and culture all over the state have been searching for larger fields of expression and to make their worth known. We are working on plans to make this possible through art competitions and shows as well as possible competitions in other areas of cultural concern, making the William Penn Museum the show case in which to display this talent. We need to carry museum service to the people and especially to the schools. At long last we have facilities with which to do it, if we can get money and more people to put to work using those facilities. Not least, we shall be in a position to help small historical societies and museums to improve their work and services and thus add to the sum total of what is being done and can be done to bring Pennsylvania abreast of the best that can be accomplished in local historical and museum effort.

A second good reason why we cannot stand still is the fact that the world of the museum, archives, and state and local history is moving. We cannot stop that world and get off it just because we might like to, unless we are ready to stand aside and let someone else do the job. In the realm of archives, in Pennsylvania the whole field of local governmental archives and records is seething with a demand for action. For just about fifty years the Commission has had the powers of a paper tiger in its responsibility for local archives. At all levels of local government from the county down to the borough and township there is a present demand for someone in Harrisburg to help with this problem. We have as a very significant part of our present archives operation the State Records Center to service state records. We have under our wing a County Records Committee which was created two years ago to start moving on the problem of evaluating certain
county records. Legislative rumblings indicate further demands coming from several levels of local government for carefully considered advice on local records management. Along with it will come naturally the first great breakthrough on a statewide program to conserve historically valuable local archives—at least those which have survived thus far.

In the museum's area hardly a month goes by without some
request from somewhere about what can be done to establish a local museum. Much of this is not soundly based, but enough of it is to create a need for action. In particular, there is a great need for extending aid in museum management. As you know, we are projecting a railroad museum and funds will soon be at hand for a museum on the lumbering industry. Museums which will bring an era or an industry to life are a new facet of a growing interest in our heritage and of the fact that we have as a people time and money to do something about it.

Further work in conservation of historic sites and buildings is in the same category. We are projecting an entirely new and more comprehensive survey and evaluation of our Commonwealth historic sites and buildings with great emphasis upon those of local significance. Museums and historical restorations are now entitled to obtain federal aid as part of the total national recreation program, and untold sums are in the future going to be released for these purposes for both state and local use. The Commission is going to have to be in the middle of this whole development if it wants to live up to its responsibilities. Unless the Commission does something and keeps on top of these new and fast moving developments, some other agency now in Harrisburg or a new one created to meet the need will take over.

We have a fine example of the potential workings of this in the current movement to create either a new state council on the arts or a cultural commission. This session of the Assembly has had both ideas dumped in its lap. Actually, the state needs these about as much as a dog needs more fleas. With the new facilities such as a fine art exhibition area and a splendid small theater, the Commission now has in the Museum, given staff to develop activity along the lines I have mentioned, everything needed to develop an expanded cultural and arts program for Pennsylvania. Instead of giving another newly created agency several thousand dollars, I can guarantee a better and more intelligent use of the money through the Commission.

I do not think the Commission can or should stand still in its support of historical research and publications, because here again the tide is running more and more strongly in the direction of more support from government. We are determined to expand our activity in this area. As some of you know, I have been
working for over a year in the interest of trying to create a private nonprofit educational foundation known as the Historical Foundation of Pennsylvania, as a device through which private funds may be secured to support projects which we have difficulty getting from the state budget office. This has been a slow and hard process and some premature notes of optimism have been sounded at times. I may say today with great caution that I believe we may be off the launching pad on this. We are not in orbit, but I hope we are generating enough “thrust” so that we will be in the not too distant future.

Let me emphasize to you with the utmost sincerity that our success is your success. We have built in the last couple decades a remarkable team in Pennsylvania in terms of the coordinated effort of both state and private organizations. We all worked together to get what we now have. Let us join in working continuously together in the future to make what we have productive of future growth and future accomplishment.