LABORER IN PENN'S VINEYARD

By PHILIP S. KLEIN

IT IS nearly impossible, when thinking about a former teacher, to separate the personal qualities from the professional guidance which we associate with him. Professor Roy F. Nichols has made many professional contributions in the areas of state and regional history, but as I consider the assignment of presenting a brief description and evaluation of these contributions, I am immediately struck by the simple realization that the way Roy went about his work was one of the main reasons for his effectiveness in it. His informality, his ready wit and love of a good laugh, his zest in pitching into difficult problems and his ability to go quickly to the heart of them, his love of the dramatic as a tool of persuasion and instruction, his tactful ways of clearing the underbrush of petty contention in meetings to open the road for serious business formed a configuration of traits which spelled accomplishment.

One episode of the 1930's which I observed as a graduate student at Penn always flashes into my mind when I think of Roy Nichols. He had been lecturing to several hundred undergraduates in a survey course in United States history, bringing them alternately to a roar of laughter or to the edge of their seats in attentive expectancy. At length his lecture concluded in a brilliant and climactic denouement. For a moment the huge classroom hung still on a thread of silence. Then, with a ping, a nickel went arching toward the raised podium which occupied the entire front of the auditorium and clinked at the feet of the lecturer. Suddenly, almost as if prearranged, the air was filled with flying pennies and nickels which landed on the rostrum. With unfailing dramatic presence, Dr. Nichols acknowledged the demonstration with a graceful bow; and then with unfailing attention to practical matters, he scurried about the podium picking up all the coins.

People always speculate about the combinations of accident and design which have directed eminent men into the particular areas of their interest. Historians point out that the themes which intrigue societies evolve in an ever shifting pattern, altering with
the changing hopes and aspirations of each generation. A cyclical recurrence of themes may be observed over centuries, growing often out of the great traumas of society such as wars, depressions, natural cataclysms, or the revolutionary oversetting of traditional institutions. Waves of historical enthusiasm nearly always accompany the major birthdays of great institutions or events. National or state centennials provide the periodic occasions for outpourings of historical writing as a kind of patriotic recognition of ancestral tribulations and achievements, and as a setting of the benchmarks of accomplishment from which the society may measure its onward march into the future.

The historical writing which accompanies such centennial birthdays is likely to come on with a rush and subside to a trickle as the landmark year recedes. But often these occasions produce ideas that do not wither when the centennial year has gone by. Some thoughtful person seizes them, works over their implications in his mind, communicates them to others, presses them into institutional form and creates things which had not existed before, both tangible in the form of organizational structures, and intangible in the form of intellectual constructs. Roy Nichols performed such creative work in the areas of regional and state history, particularly the Middle Atlantic region and Pennsylvania. We will look at this work in its two major forms: the institutional effort to create in Pennsylvania a statewide historical organization, and the intellectual effort to show the intimate relationship between the politics of the states and the politics of the nation. These two approaches, the practical and the philosophical, complemented each other and underwent changes and development as Dr. Nichols' career progressed.

A son of New Jersey, a graduate student and later teacher at Columbia University, Professor Nichols came to the Keystone State in his late twenties as a member of the history faculty at the University of Pennsylvania where he was to serve as a dynamic teacher, a prodigious scholar, and a virile administrator for the remainder of his active life. His associations with the New Jersey-New York-Pennsylvania region from the very beginning of his career fixed his attention permanently on this heartland of the nation. Commemorative occasions focused his interests still further. He recalls that the centennial of Lincoln's birth in 1909,
and the semicentennial of the Civil War between 1911 and 1915 left on his mind indelible marks of wonder and curiosity about the great personalities and events of those earlier years.

The Sesquicentennial of the Declaration of Independence in 1926 raised a flurry of historical activity in Pennsylvania which focused the attention of the young new Penn professor on the curious fact that, although more than a hundred historical and patriotic societies functioned in the Commonwealth, none represented the state as a whole. The one with the greatest resources and renown, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania founded in 1824, would more accurately have been named the historical society of Philadelphia, for it restricted its management and historical interests almost entirely to that city where its imposing headquarters were located. The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, similarly, dealt very largely with the Pittsburgh metropolitan area. Impressed with the richness of the history of Pennsylvania and the strange absence of any historical organization which had a view wider than a county, Dr. Nichols began to inquire whether some institution ought not to be dedicated to the history of the whole Commonwealth, comprising a membership from every class and every geographical region of the state. It seemed beyond comprehension to him that the story of a state which had played so conspicuous a role in the formation of the United States was not being taught in schools and colleges, that those who were concerned about it had no regular contacts with each other, and that no Pennsylvania historical journal looked beyond county boundaries. His proposal to consider such an organization appeared self-evident to many historians in Pennsylvania who, preoccupied with other matters, had apparently overlooked the obvious.

Dr. Nichols brought this subject into the program of the American Historical Association at its Indianapolis meeting of April, 1928, where he presented a paper outlining his concept of the purposes and proper functions of the study of local and state history. He emphasized the ways in which history professors in colleges isolated from the great repositories of historical sources could utilize original materials from their own localities for significant research and writing. Developing ideas which must certainly have grown in part from his earlier student days under Dixon Ryan Fox at Columbia University, Dr. Nichols made a plea for higher
regard by both scholars and laymen for the significance and fundamental importance of careful scholarship in local history. Greater activity in this field by many college professors working with unique local resources would bring them into closer contact with each other, it would inspire the exchange of ideas, lead to the discovery of much historical material lying dormant in attics because no one earlier had recognized its importance, bring academic researchers and historical society people into mutual dependence and shared activities, and ultimately arouse a sense of the worth of the community in everyone's mind and bring new zest into history classrooms where young people could recognize the unfolding of the national traditions in their own familiar surroundings.

A few efforts had already been undertaken, emanating mainly from Harrisburg and looking in this same general direction. A State Historical Commission, a State Museum, and a Bureau of State Archives functioned there in the 1920's, independent of each other but all subordinate agencies of the Department of Public Instruction. Also, a Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies existed at whose annual meetings in Harrisburg an exchange of ideas took place between delegates from the member historical and patriotic societies.

Albert Cook Myers, a well-known Quaker historian, member of the Pennsylvania Historical Commission and in 1928 the president of the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies, moved Dr. Nichols from speculation to action in the field of Pennsylvania History in May, 1928, by having him named chairman of a new Federation committee to investigate the historical needs of the Commonwealth. After a wide canvass by questionnaire of teachers and the members of the historical societies, Dr. Nichols' committee drew up a report in 1929 pointing out the need for closer relationship between the school community and the patriotic and historical societies. Since the Federation had no individual members but admitted only organizations to membership, its activities immediately touched only the few people who attended annual meetings as local society delegates. The Nichols committee explored the possibility of altering the character of the Federation to bring college and secondary school history teachers within its membership, and in this way to ally more closely the historical and edu-
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cational agencies of the Commonwealth. The Federation, however, wished not to alter its traditional forms and purposes, and the idea of building, on its institutional base, a statewide fraternity of history teachers and local society members failed to develop.

By 1930 many of the college history teachers who had briefly discussed the idea of a state historical society during the Sesqui-centennial celebration in 1926 had again been aroused to interest by Dr. Nichols' paper to the American Historical Association, by the work of the A.H.A. committee on research in colleges, by the reported results of the Nichols questionnaire on Pennsylvania history, and by the desire of the Federation not to change. Western Pennsylvanians were further stirred to action by plans for a regional survey there, and by the personal influence of Dr. Solon J. Buck who came to conduct this survey in 1931 and of Dr. John W. Oliver of the University of Pittsburgh whose efforts had been important in obtaining funds from the Buhl Foundation for it.

Such stirrings in the academic community led Professors Asa E. Martin and Wayland F. Dunaway of Penn State to call a conference there in April, 1932, attended by representatives of all the major groups interested in state and local history. They agreed that the time had come to inaugurate a state historical society reflecting all aspects of the history of the Commonwealth and receiving as members both individuals and institutions. A planning convention was scheduled and met at State College in September, 1932, where action was taken to inaugurate the Pennsylvania Historical Association. Dr. Nichols served, with A. Boyd Hamilton, former Chairman of the Historical Commission, and Paul W. Gates of Bucknell University, as temporary officers to organize the newly projected state society. At the inaugural meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association at Bethlehem, April 28-29, 1933, Dr. Nichols' former mentor, Dr. Dixon Ryan Fox, then President of the New York State Historical Association, gave the major address. The new Association named Dr. Nichols its vice-president, and at the expiration of this term, he became the second president of the organization he had done so much to create, serving in this capacity from 1936 to 1939.

As president, he laid before the growing state association two major objectives for the future: preparation of the scholarly groundwork for the later publication of a comprehensive history
of Pennsylvania, thoroughly documented, in perhaps ten or twelve volumes; and corollary to this, the development in the Commonwealth of a major depository for the materials of state and local history encompassing wider scope than the existing collections of city or county societies.

Evolving naturally from the first objective came suggestions to graduate students at the University of Pennsylvania to undertake doctoral dissertations in the field of Pennsylvania political history. In these projects, several of Dr. Nichols' interests coalesced: his plans for a monographic series on which a general state history might be based, and his own then current research on the history of the Democratic party through the presidency of James Buchanan which involved many Pennsylvania sidelights. Over the years, Dr. Nichols supervised half a dozen doctoral students at Penn, whose published works told the story of Pennsylvania politics in detail from 1740 to 1848. They were Pennsylvania Politics and the Growth of Democracy, 1740-1776 by Theodore Thayer (1953); The Counter-Revolution in Pennsylvania, 1776-1790 by Robert L. Brunhouse (1942); The Republicans and Federalists in Pennsylvania, 1790-1801 by Harry M. Tinkcom (1950); The Keystone in the Democratic Arch: Pennsylvania Politics, 1800-1816 by Sanford W. Higginbotham (1952); Pennsylvania Politics, 1817-1832: A Game without Rules by Philip S. Klein (1941); and The Jacksonian Heritage: Pennsylvania Politics, 1833-1848 by Charles McCool Snyder (1958). This series was later continued at Penn State where Dr. Klein directed graduate students there in preparing: "Pennsylvania Politics, 1848-1861," by John M. Coleman (completed 1970, not yet published); The Triumph of Militant Republicanism: A Study of Pennsylvania and Presidential Politics, 1860-1872 by Erwin S. Bradley (1964); and Pennsylvania Politics, 1872-1877: A Study in Political Leadership by Frank B. Evans (1966). This series, projected by Dr. Nichols in the mid-1930's, has thus spanned Pennsylvania history from 1740 to 1877 in monograph form, and provided a scholarly base for a political history of Pennsylvania through most of the 18th and 19th centuries.

In addition to these studies, each purposely linked to the other as a cohesive whole, Dr. Nichols directed or participated in a number of doctoral programs which produced other important
studies of the Middle-Atlantic region. His colleagues, especially Arthur C. Bining and Leonidas Dodson, also directed students into Pennsylvania-centered research, Bining in the economic and Dodson in the colonial field. Out of these individual and team efforts came a host of worthy dissertations and books by such scholars as Fred M. Binder, Edwin B. Bronner, Richard O. Curry, David F. Hawke, Mahlon Hellerich, Victor L. Johnson, Samuel R. Kamm, James A. Kehl, Henrietta Krone, Hugh T. Lefler, Joan Leonard, Richard P. McCormick, Frederick K. Miller, John Munroe, William T. Parsons, Paul W. Pritchard, John J. Reed, Norman B. Wilkinson, Carleton O. Wittlinger, and others. Dr. Nichols also participated actively in the planning and production of the biographical series published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in the early 1940's under the general title *Pennsylvania Lives*. Thirty-five years after Dr. Nichols, as president of the Pennsylvania Historical Association in 1936, had proposed the preparation of a series of scholarly monographs as the foundation for a comprehensive history of Pennsylvania, much of the spade work had been done, and he had directed most of it.

Another long-range institutional objective—the development of a major depository for the state's historical resources—demanded Dr. Nichols' attention in the early 1940's, when he became a member of the Eighth Historical Commission of Pennsylvania. He had for several years been involved in an advisory way with the massive W. P. A. enterprise known as the Historical Records Survey which was bringing together an unprecedented inventory of all kinds of historical documents in Pennsylvania. In December, 1939, he had addressed the Society of American Archivists on the opportunities and problems arising in the still new National Archives edifice in Washington. And he was at this moment also the president of the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies.

During his three years on the Pennsylvania Historical Commission, working with such long-term members as Ross Pier Wright and Miss Frances Dorrance, and with Dr. S. K. Stevens, then State Historian and later to be Executive Director of the Commission, Dr. Nichols gave persistent attention to developing a closer relationship between all the historically oriented agencies financed by the State. The unification of these agencies under
the reorganized Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission in 1945 marked an important step in the desired direction. In that year, also, following a surge of enthusiasm accompanying the tri-centennial of the birth of William Penn, celebrated in 1944, the State Legislature authorized the building of major structures adjacent to the Capitol grounds for historical and museum purposes as a memorial to the founder of Pennsylvania. This splendid complex, completed in October, 1946, bore the title "The William Penn Memorial Archives and Museum Building," and provided not only the integration of historically related activities, but the professional staff and facilities to dignify the history of the state on the scale that Dr. Nichols had dreamed of in 1936 while president of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, and which he had elaborated in some detail in his article in Pennsylvania History entitled: "Has the History of the Middle States Been Neglected?"1

In addition to serving as president of the Pennsylvania Historical Association and of the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies, and as an influential member of the state Historical Commission, Dr. Nichols gave of his energy to many other organizations related to state and local history. He had a deep interest in the teaching of history in the secondary schools, and channeled this into the work of the Middle States Association of History Teachers, an organization of which he held the presidency in 1932 and 1933. A deep personal attachment to the study of genealogy led him to be an active member of the Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania, based in Philadelphia, and to hold its presidency for many years. He also was president of the Genealogical Society of America for a decade, 1946-1957.

In Philadelphia he was a constant participant in the work of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, serving as a Councillor, member of the Publications Committee, and Vice-President. He was a Vice-President of the American Philosophical Society, a Vice-President of the Philadelphia Athenaeum, a director of the Presbyterian Historical Society, and Chairman of the Philadelphia Historical Commission.

The activities thus far enumerated might seem to constitute work enough to fill a busy life, but in truth Dr. Nichols' leader-

ship in many areas of state and local history comprise only a fragment of his remarkable career. His major institutional efforts went into committee and administrative management of national professional societies, and into his manifold services to the University of Pennsylvania as Professor of History, Dean of the Graduate School, and Vice Provost. But the most important and time-consuming of all was not his practical and institutional work, but his intellectual and philosophical activity; his program of rigorous research and writing. His evolving thought about state and local history showed through in his historical writings, and nowhere more explicitly than in his major works on the history of the Democratic party in the United States.

This sequence of books starting with *The Democratic Machine, 1850-1854*, published in 1923, progressed through the biography of Franklin Pierce (1931), and came to its brilliant climax in the reinterpretation of the Buchanan administration in *The Disruption of American Democracy* (1948). In a final volume of this analysis of politics in the decade of the 1850’s, Dr. Nichols wrote a general introduction, under the title *The Invention of the American Political Parties* (1967), which examined the growth of the mechanics of political parties from colonial times until 1850.

These four books, in essence, trace the acquisition and wielding of political power in the United States from the earliest stages of personal and parochial management in colonial days up to the institutionalization of political parties on a national scale with national committees, nominating procedures, platforms, leadership, and the presumption of continuous existence. The period which Dr. Nichols studied in greatest detail, that of the second quarter of the nineteenth century, represented an intermediate stage of party development, characterized by constantly shifting policies and leadership operating through a loose federation of state organizations. In order to understand the onrush of events in the pre-Civil War years, he wrote: “It has been necessary to place the situation under the microscope.”

This must be done, in some scores of states, because the disruption of the American Democracy cannot be explained by any concise formula of nation-wide application. The party, like the nation, was a federal system; it was not so much a national organization as a federation of
state machines. It can be understood only by a microscopic examination of the particular relations of the three elements which were its most important constituents—the voters, the machines and the leaders—both in their national and in their state relations.\(^2\)

In these volumes, Dr. Nichols has examined in more cumulative detail than any modern historian the particularism of party politics in the pre-Civil War period, and the close inter-relationship between state and national parties. He has traced the conduct of national politicians back to their personal and political connections at home, and examined the factional aspirations and feuds in the parties of every state in the Union.

He has studied with particular attention the conflicts in New York and Pennsylvania, then the two largest and economically most influential states in the Union. In *The Disruption of American Democracy*, Dr. Nichols makes the clear statement that it is in the local community that the seeds of political discontent grow fastest. The total effect of his research on the growth of the American party system is to suggest the heavy responsibility of political managers on the state and local levels. The recognition that hate-arousing pettiness and spite at the local level brings portentous national consequences leaps from many pages of these volumes. The careful student of Dr. Nichols' work will soon be persuaded that neither national nor state history is more important or significant than the other; but that each is tied tightly to the other in a complex, shifting relationship of cultural federalism—the ever-present but rarely noticed body of peculiar regional attitudes which influence political behavior.

In summary, we can see the tangible results of Roy Nichols' interest in state history in the Pennsylvania Historical Association and in more than a score of scholarly monographs on state and regional topics. His philosophic influence in this field has been to bring state and local history into a new and more meaningful relationship to national history, an influence which affects the whole historical profession.