

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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The year 1952 marks the twentieth anniversary of the Pennsylvania Historical Association's founding. Strangely, in all those twenty years little, if any, attention appears to have been given to writing even a summary history of the Association. The record of those twenty years is to be found in two principal sources. One is the formal minute book of the Association and the other is the pages of *Pennsylvania History* with its reports of the annual meetings and its record of the scholarly interests of the organization in the many papers and the few source documents published therein. Presumably, we should rely upon the recollections of some of the founders and early leaders, as a basic source for Association history. Time did not permit writing to individuals to ask for the formation which might be obtained from this source. Perhaps the secretary will undertake this task in preparation for the twenty-fifth anniversary, which will soon be upon us. What is written here is based upon the formal records which

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constitute our archives. It is not always easy to warm such records into a very thrilling narrative.

As one looks over the minutes of the preliminary meeting held in State College on April 29 and 30 in 1932 and then turns to the record of the larger "convention," to use the term applied in the secretary's minutes to the later September 15-17 meeting, also in State College, the question arises at once as to just why it was felt necessary to organize the Association in the first place. It is here that we find formal records lacking in much evidence with which to answer the question. We have no idea of the personal ideas and influences which were back of the movement to organize a statewide historical organization. There already was in existence, and had been for more than a hundred years, the venerable Historical Society of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia. A statewide organization of the county and local societies existed, since 1903 and functioned as the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies. In 1913 the commonwealth itself took a hand in the state's historical activity by creating a Pennsylvania Historical Commission. To an outsider, it must have appeared in 1932 that the historical interests of the state were served already by a number of organizations. Why add another?

The minutes provide a partial answer. The first sentence in the record for the informal get-together in State College on April 29-30, 1932 starts with the statement "Recognizing the need for an active statewide historical society which should appeal both to the professional and non-professional historians in Pennsylvania, Dr. Asa E. Martin and Dr. W. F. Dunaway of Pennsylvania State College and Dr. Solon J. Buck of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey decided to call a meeting of those interested in establishing such a society." Among those present were Dr. Arthur C. Bining of the University of Pennsylvania, Mr. Julian P. Boyd of the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society, Mr. J. F. Brougher of the State Department of Public Instruction, Dr. Solon J. Buck of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey, Dr. Roy F. Nichols of the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Hiram Shenk, then state archivist, Dr. Paul W. Catos, then at Bucknell University and now at Cornell University, Dr. Robert Fortenbaugh, Dr. L. H. Gipson of Lehigh University, Miss Frances Dorrance, and of course Drs. Martin and Dunaway, along with five or six other persons.

Out of the discussions of the two days came an important decision. It was agreed that the Pennsylvania Historical Commission and the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies should be asked to call a "Pennsylvania Historical Convention" in the fall at State College. Miss Frances Dorrance,

Hon. A. Boyd Hamilton, and Drs, Shenk, Dunaway, Oliver, Nichols and Gates were on this committee, along with Mr. C. M. Sullivan of the Lock Haven State Teachers College. The call was issued and on September 15-17 the proposed meeting was held at State College. It was at this meeting that formal action was taken to organize the Pennsylvania Historical Association. The Hon. A. Boyd Hamilton of Harrisburg, long active in the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies was made temporary president. Dr. Roy F. Nichols was designated temporary vice-president and Dr. Paul W. Gates secretary. A committee was at once appointed to draft a constitution and it was headed by Dr. Solon Buck. A committee to prepare for the first annual meeting was likewise appointed, headed by Dr. Gipson. The committees held meetings in Harrisburg in January. On April 28-29, 1933, the first annual meeting was scheduled to meet at Bethlehem.

The important question of just why this new association was projected is still not entirely answered. Lacking personal correspondence or recollections of those who led the way by calling the April meeting in State College, we shall hazard a guess based on our own personal recollections. Perhaps our conjecture is wrong and will be corrected by those who were present and took part in the early stages of the movement to organize a new statewide historical society. The answer, it appears to me, lies predominantly in the fact that several persons, and especially those associated with the State College meetings, felt that none of the existing historical organizations in the commonwealth were meeting all the needs for a strong Pennsylvania Historical Program.

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, after an early flurry as a statewide historical society, lapsed into the status of a great manuscript depository with little concern for the statewide historical interests of Pennsylvania. The Federation held an annual meeting and published an annual Year Book listing the societies and the activities. It appointed committees and their reports, if they had been carried out, would have brought about the millennium. But they were seldom implemented by action. Officers changed every year and many felt the Federation had become merely a forum for representatives of the societies to report at length and with deadly detail on their year's activity. The Pennsylvania Historical Commission, representing the official interest of the state government in history, had not accomplished much that was noteworthy in the field of Pennsylvania history. Its early research program was confined almost entirely to archaeology, and no single publication of any value had yet been printed in the history field by the Commission. One of its

major concerns was the erection, in cooperation with historical and patriotic societies, of huge boulders with elaborate bronze plaques marking historic sites. To the active and alert historians in the colleges and universities it gave little promise of producing a dynamic or scholarly program of research or publications in Pennsylvania history.

At the same time, there is evidence that the founders of the Association were fearful that their move might be interpreted as an effort to by-pass the existing organizations. This, no doubt, was the reason for calling upon the Pennsylvania Historical Commission and the Federation to unite in a call for a convention to consider a statewide historical society. Some may also have believed that the organization of a statewide society based primarily upon individual membership would strengthen both the Commission and the Federation. Certainly from the very beginning there was a close association between the new Pennsylvania Historical Association and the older historical agencies.

The first annual meeting at Bethlehem saw the Association launched in formal fashion with adoption of a constitution. A. Boyd Hamilton was elected the first president. Again there was shown the desire of the infant Association to cooperate closely with the already established organizations which had been asked to call the State College convention. Despite that, both the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies and the Pennsylvania Historical Commission should be asked to designate a representative as a continuing member of the Association's governing body, the council. Certainly this proved a wise decision, as has been demonstrated by the close cooperation of the Association, the Federation, and the Commission during the last twenty years.

Historians have folkways of their own-though few have ever stopped to realize and some may be indignant at the suggestion. One of those folkways is that whenever several historians, professional or non-professional, band together to form a society they soon turn to the projection of a publication. And it is usually a quarterly magazine. There is no indication that those who founded the Pennsylvania Historical Association believed that the society would ever become equipped with a headquarters building or carry on the various projects associated with the common types of local, county, or state historical societies such as collection and preservation of manuscripts, antiquities, and the like. No doubt it was felt that the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the state historical records authorities,

and the several county historical societies were equipped to perform this function for the commonwealth.

The one major project which did quickly attract the attention of the newly-born Association was the projection of an historical quarterly. Dr. Solon Buck at the Bethlehem meeting spoke of the urgent need for starting a periodical. At a meeting of the Council on April 30, 1933, Doctor Buck as chairman of the committee on publications recommended the appointment of Dr. Arthur C. Bining of the University of Pennsylvania as editor for such a publication. The recommendation was unanimously approved and a board of editors appointed to assist Doctor Bining. On October 13 Doctor Bining reported that material was in hand for a first number of 48 pages. The treasurer showed that funds were available to print it and the first number of *Pennsylvania History* was authorized. The first issue, Volume 1, No. 1, appeared in January, 1934. As one compares it with the latest issues and those which have appeared through the years, the remarkable growth and steady improvement of the periodical is unmistakable. The very first issue, however, set the pattern for those to come. It contained a fine blend of the specialized, scholarly historical article on early labor difficulties in the anthracite coal fields with the brilliant popular address of Dr. Dixon Ryan Fox at the first annual meeting, there were also a section of news and comment on historical society activities and selected book reviews.

Other patterns of behavior for the Association, which have determined its future course of action, were likewise established at an early date. The first annual meeting was at Bethlehem, as we have noted. A Moravian supper and an historical pilgrimage gave local color to the meeting and started the practice of using the annual meeting to acquaint the membership with the pattern of history and life found in the various regions in Pennsylvania in which the Association holds its meetings. This is in contrast with the habit of many societies of meeting in a fixed location from year to year. The second annual meeting was held in May, 1934, at Harrisburg. The third met in April, 1935, in Pittsburgh. The pattern of spring meetings was altered the same year. A fall meeting was scheduled the same, to take advantage of activities associated in Philadelphia with plans for the forthcoming celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Federal constitution. Since that date, the annual meeting has been held in the autumn. State College, Harrisburg, Carlisle, Reading, Lancaster, Erie, Williamsport, and Norristown are other Pennsylvania towns and cities visited by the Association through the years.

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Not only was it decided to take the Association meeting to different parts of the state but a part of this plan centered upon the wish to bring the Association into close contact with the local historical activities of the commonwealth. The Pittsburgh meeting was held in conjunction with and institute or conference on western Pennsylvania history. From the start each Association meeting was held in close cooperation with the local historical society of the county and also with local colleges and universities. This always has provided a fine blending of the historical interests and activities of the professional and the lay historians in every community visited by the Association through its meetings.

Thus were patterns for future growth established very early in the Association's history. As one reads through minutes detailing the deliberations of the Council two themes recur continually. One is the problem of increasing membership and the other the closely related problem of finances. By 1937 the Association membership had passed the 300 mark. It has grown slowly but steadily despite frequent lamentations about the small number of members as compared with the total membership possibilities of such and association as ours. The second problem is that of finances. The Association may well lay claim to always having been "poor but proud." At no time in its twenty year history has it enjoyed any fat balances in the treasury. It has always been one jump ahead of the printer in meeting the bills for the printing of each issue. These facts should be a comfort to those who today must continue to struggle with these problems. Had not inflation led to the skyrocketing of printing costs the problem no longer would exist because membership has grown to a point where revenues would, under prices of a few years ago, met all costs.

In 1936 a committee on future plans and policies headed by Dr. Lawrence H. Gipson was created to consider seriously plans for the future growth of the Association and to chart the direction of the growth. A survey produced a report printed in the April, 1937, issue of *Pennsylvania History*. This report looked forward to several extremely ambitious projects, many of which are yet to be realized. It recommended a committee to consider the publication of a series of documentary source books on Pennsylvania history. A monumental history of the commonwealth in several volumes was seen as an Association objective. An historical index, to include all the historical periodicals of the commonwealth, was urged. Inauguration of a series of monographs in the field of Pennsylvania history was recommended. Projection of the monograph series has been realized and is being continued.

War and inflation were the deadly enemies of such costly and ambitious projects as the volume history and documentary source series.

In the meantime the urgent need felt by many Association leaders in the 1930's for scholarly publications, including sources, in the field of Pennsylvania history has been met in part through the newly inaugurated program of historical publications launched by the Pennsylvania Historical Commission, now the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Starting with Doctor Bining's splendid study on the history of Pennsylvania iron manufacturing in the 18th century. The close relationship and contacts existing between members and leaders of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission has helped make this work possible. In this sense, the Association may well claim some share in the credit for this harvest of publications of the last twelve years. All of these studies have helped lay a sound groundwork for the long range objective of a series of volumes covering all phases of Pennsylvania history in a monumental series.

One of the most fruitful projects of the Association was that of directing the preparation of a bibliography of Pennsylvania's history. *Writing on Pennsylvania History-A Bibliography* appeared in 1946 under the joint editorship of Arthur C. Bining, Robert L. Brunhouse, and Norman B. Wilkinson. Its publication was made possible through a unique cooperative arrangement. An association committee on Pennsylvania Bibliography appointed by President Nichols had labored to prepare an outline for such a bibliography. The committee was enlarged in 1940 and it was recommended that funds be sourced to prepare the bibliography. The Pennsylvania Historical Commission agreed to assume all the expenses of publishing such a volume. With this assurance the American Philosophical Society generously granted the funds to make possible the editorial work. The result was the appearance in 1946 of this fine contribution. The task of continuing the bibliography was undertaken by the Commission and in the near future a supplementary volume will be printed.

Running as a thread through all the work and deliberations of the Associations through its first twenty years has been a deep interest in and concern for the use of Pennsylvania history in the schools of the commonwealth. From its start, social studies representatives of the State Department of Public Instruction were active in Association plans and activities in this field. At several meetings a special place was provided on the program to provide for needs of teachers. For a period of years a special section of *Pennsylvania History* was devoted to the pedagogy of local history. Neither of

these expedients appeared to meet with complete success. Teachers in the public schools sometimes resented the implication that their needs and interests were so different from those of others. More and more schools have become subscribers to *Pennsylvania History* and more and more teachers have become members. The magazine has become valuable to teachers in terms of its accumulation of articles on all phases of the commonwealth's history. Very probably, as time goes on the Association magazine will find its way into every school in Pennsylvania. In the meantime, the Association has contributed much to the success with which Pennsylvania history is being taught in our schools.

Twenty years is a short time in the history of an organization. The first twenty years are probably the hardest years. As I read back through the pages of minutes and reports which are the formal record of both the hopes and the accomplishments of those twenty years, I am impressed by the continuity of purpose and the high quality of achievement in realizing those purposes. Our Association has not wrought any miracles in the world of Pennsylvania history but it's certainly made steady progress in building, in cooperation with other existing agencies and organizations, toward a solid structure of statewide historical accomplishment.

We can look forward, I am sure, to the next twenty years with high hopes of continued progress and accomplishment. The Pennsylvania Historical Association, in twenty short years, has grown into one of the strong and important forces in shaping historical activity in Pennsylvania. It has likewise attained the stature of one of the more influential and effective statewide historical organizations of the nation.