CONRAD WEISER'S INVENTORY

By J. BENNETT NOLAN

The resurrection of the characteristics and personality of a figure who once loomed large in the public vision but who has passed to his account so long ago that no contemporary acquaintances survive, can best be obtained by his correspondence. If letters exist, the atmosphere of a bygone age and the attributes of the deceased writer may be reconstructed by a faithful biographer with reasonable accuracy.

There is, however, another source of posthumous information, perhaps hitherto neglected, namely, in the inventory and appraisement filed of record in the estate of the deceased. If such a paper is available, it often reflects the qualities, attributes and pursuits of the living man. It evidences his taste by his clothing and furniture; his intellectual bent and attainment by the books he read; the cordiality of his friendships by financial aid extended, and his recreation by implements of sport.

The recent discovery in the archives of the Register's Office of Berks County of the inventory of that outstanding figure in Pennsylvania provincial history, Conrad Weiser, the great pioneer interpreter and guide who was officially connected with every important conference and Indian treaty from 1740 until his death in 1760, well illustrates this statement.

Weiser's appraisal was filed by his daughter and two of his sons, all executors, in February, 1762. Some of the other children and legatees, including his mother-in-law, Maria Muhlenberg Weiser, wife of the patriarch, Reverend Henry Melchior Muhlenberg,
were sufficiently concerned to be present at the making of the appraisement. The list is interesting and diversified and throws new light upon the personality of an extraordinary man.

For Conrad Weiser was one who in his time played many parts and played them well. He held the offices of Ranger and Justice of the Peace, had been Provincial Interpreter and Lay Judge; he was one of the commissioners who laid out the town of Reading; he was a friend and correspondent of all the members of the Proprietary family and of every Colonial governor from Patrick Gordon to James Hamilton, and of the great Franklin. His curious religious vagaries caused his withdrawal from active life in the zenith of his career to spend several futile and repentant years as a monastic in the cloister at Ephrata. All of these varied avocations and episodes are reflected in his inventory.

The list begins with an item of nearly £600 in ready cash, which suggests that either the emoluments from his interpreter’s office were larger than has been supposed, or that his store in Reading had greatly prospered.

Wearing apparel, to the amount of £32, indicates an unexpected trace of foppery in a man who only fifteen years before affected the garb of an Onondaga chief-tain. The more authentic trend of latter day historical investigation has discredited the popular representation of Weiser in a high beaver hat and yet the cane sword listed in the inventory is a touch of luxury not to be expected of a plain pioneer Indian fighter.

Nor is his library less surprising. Weiser’s letters are preserved in the files of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. From them we know that, barring the deficiencies in orthography so common to his epoch, he could write a graceful and fluent English, although he habitually spoke in the German tongue. But who would have expected that he would possess and pre-
A Portion of Conrad Weiser's Inventory
From the Original in the Register's Office of Berks County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Description</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brought from below</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>$26.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A black walnut chest of two drawers lined with black wool</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>$14.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing paper, blank books, dealer's way, paper</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>$14.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrapin</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>$2.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four cond. sticks five自我 plates a for showing</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>$10.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two cond. sticks five SELF plates a for showing</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>$10.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A large looking glass &amp; a small</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>$2.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An inventory of the household, household books and estate which were of Conrad Weiser...
sumably read such works as Voltaire's life of Charles of Sweden or Godfrey Arnholtz's works, or the Württemberg genealogy?

The six doctrinal tracts on the *Unitas Fratrum* suggests that he carefully studied the tenets of the Moravians whom to the end of his life he seems to have cordially hated. The hymn book and breviaries were probably with him in his monastic cell at Ephrata. Then, too, the possession of an organ with much printed music and the apparent arrangement of a music room in his dwelling at Womelsdorf, show a wholly unlooked-for musical discrimination. This is surely the same organ upon which Henry Melchior Muhlenberg practised when he came to Tulpehocken to court Weiser's daughter and to which he alludes in his journal:

*Immediately on my arrival, during the first half year, I earned my board, made friends and convinced old Weiser's sensibilities so that he gave me his daughter as my wife and helpmate because at my first visit I played and sang the edifying Halle songs on his house organ or seraphine.*

The law books, Justice's pleader and early digests of law, show that he took his office as Lay Judge of Berks County in all seriousness and honestly endeavored by later study to atone for the educational deficiency of his youth. The various Pennsylvania maps, framed and unframed, are evidence of his interest in the geography of his adopted province, whose boundaries he so often helped to define and determine in many conferences with the aborigines.

The blunderbuss, pistols and ammunition remind us that he held the rank of colonel in the ill-starred campaign of Braddock and in the avenging expedition of Forbes—a reminiscence, too, of the times when from his chamber window he could see against the northern horizon the glare of the burning barns and dwellings of the Palatine settlers and made ready to defend his
own homestead against the raiding French and Indians.

Surprising traces of an unlooked-for refinement abound in this extraordinary record. We would not, for instance, suppose that a man who ordinarily wore the fur jerkin of the trapper would carry a silver watch. The presence of an abundance of linen sheets may be explained by the circumstance that Weiser was a merchant and carried articles of trade, but who would have conjectured that one who spent most of his life in the saddle and in the field would have found time to assemble articles of household adornment? Silver spoons, decanters, a walnut desk, andirons, tea tongs, Delft plates—these are articles which one might anticipate in the inventory of a Philadelphia dilettante of the period, but scarcely in the appraisement of a rough upstate frontiersman.

The long list of debtors suggests that the Interpreter, in addition to conducting his famous white store in the Penn Square at Reading, did a thrifty business as money lender. For it is not to be supposed that such large credits would represent merely purchases of merchandise. The array of credits listed as "bonds" represent money loaned and at interest, and the list contains the names of nearly all the important men of the period in Berks County. Indeed, it must have been difficult for Conrad to walk down the street in Reading without encountering someone who owed him money.

The Associate Judge, Jonas Seely, who sat with him on the Bench of Justice, was in his debt for £12. The County of Berks owed him £30, and two of the County Commissioners were personally in his debt. There were, at that time, only four active practicing attorneys at the Berks Bar and three of them, James Biddle, James Whitehead, Junior, and David Henderson, owed him substantial sums. Conrad was probably
aware of the homely Pennsylvania Dutch proverb that "He who sups with the devil must have a long spoon" but evidently the adroit Interpreter had nothing to fear from the wiles of the legal fraternity.

Even his minister before whom he knelt each Sabbath, the Reverend Bernard Michael Hausihn, was in his debt for £6. All of his children had been advanced substantial sums, except only his daughter, the erring Mrs. Fricker who had married a Roman Catholic and against whom Weiser, broadminded as he was, bitterly discriminated in his will. Perhaps the circumstance that he condoned many of the family obligations in his testament induced the heirs to give him so hilarious a funeral. For we find in the records of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, a list of the liquors consumed at his obsequies, embracing such formidable items as nine gallons of wine, five and one-half gallons of rum and an incredible amount of punch.

The great Interpreter passed to his reward nearly two centuries ago and to a semi-oblivion from which his name and fame have only recently been rescued. He lives again in this worn yellow record, perhaps more accurately, and certainly more humanly, than in the estimates of his biographers.

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1 Registry of Wills, Berks County, Pennsylvania.
2 Conrad Weiser Correspondence, II. 175.