THE POSSIBILITIES OF PHILADELPHIA AS A CENTER FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH*

We of the University of Pennsylvania are particularly happy to have this opportunity of extending to you our hospitality because your visit is so timely. We are very much in an historical mood. Not only has Philadelphia been participating actively in the celebration of the sesquicentennial of the Constitution, but the University is at work upon plans for its bicentennial. In preparation for this latter anniversary, we are reviewing our own development, and an honored member of our University family and of your Association, Dr. Edward P. Cheyney, is writing a history of the University which will also serve as a contribution to the cultural history of the nation.

No city in the United States should be more stimulating to historical interest than Philadelphia. Few other pre-Revolutionary communities have preserved so much of their past. Yesterday, you visited Independence Hall and Christ Church. Nearby are Carpen-

* Address of Thomas S. Gates, President of the University of Pennsylvania, upon the occasion of the complimentary luncheon tendered by the University of Pennsylvania to members of the American Historical Association and Societies meeting concurrently on Thursday, December 30, 1937.
ter's Hall, the old Custom House which was once the home of the Bank of the United States, and a number of ancient dwellings around which cluster many traditions. I wish that time and weather might permit you to visit the mansions in Fairmount Park, to motor out to Valley Forge and to the Brandywine, to walk through Germantown, to visit Washington's Crossing and really to absorb the sense of the past which I fear many of us take too much for granted.

That this environment is stimulating to historical study can be easily demonstrated by a brief reference to the work that has been done here. Philadelphia was scarcely two decades old when a settler, Gabriel Thomas, wrote *An Historical and Geographical Account of the Province . . . of Pensilvania*. To be sure, this, like Penn's earlier descriptions, was largely for advertising purposes, but the historical idea was there and with Thomas the line of historians began. The most notable colonial successor of this Welsh historian was none other than the illustrious Franklin whose interest seems never to have been limited by any known bounds. The spirit of history breathes through his writings.

After the Revolution, Robert Proud started a new line of historians and presented the story of his own community in his *History of Penn- sylvania in North America*. But Americans could be also interested in the world at large and David Ramsay contributed to that wider outlook. Though for many years a resident of South Carolina, he was a native of this Commonwealth and an alumnus of Pennsylvania. He not only wrote a *History of the United States*, but ventured to publish a *Universal History Americanized!* A third historically minded Philadelphian was John F. Watson, author of the well-known *Annals of Philadelphia*, who was one of the early American social historians, a spiritual ancestor of our toastmaster.¹ When The Historical Society of Pennsylvania was founded, he outlined a program for the proper promotion of local history which anticipated much that has been proposed in later time.

Early Philadelphians were interested in the publication of sources as well as in the writing of history. Ebenezer Hazard gathered together enough to fill the two volumes of an *Historical Collection of State Papers* which were heartily received by no less an authority than the Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson. This interest in the printing of sources bore early and significant fruit. Job Roberts Tyson and

¹ Referring to Dr. Dixon Ryan Fox, President of Union College.
Hazard's son became interested in a more ambitious project of making a systematic publication of the Archives of the Commonwealth. A joint committee of the Philosophical and the Historical Societies of which Tyson was a leading spirit joined in a petition to the legislature in 1836 praying for such a publication. The time was well chosen as Tyson's brother was chairman of the appropriations committee of the house. The necessary law was passed and Pennsylvania became the first state to print its archives. Series after series has been published and the enterprise is still going on as we enter the hundredth year since the appearance of the first volume.

So far as this work is concerned, it must be considered in the terms of today as done by amateurs. American scholarship had not yet addressed itself to the nation's history. In fact, teaching of history did not begin at the University of Pennsylvania until the 1840's when a professor of English, Henry Reed, presented a course of lectures in English history. In the next decade his brother, William B. Reed, gave one of the earliest courses in American history scheduled in any institution of higher learning. He also wrote some history and became involved in a spirited quarrel with no less an authority than George Bancroft. In fact this was the second challenge to New England historians. Job Roberts Tyson, to whom I have alluded above, in a thoughtful paper denied certain New England claims and maintained that Pennsylvania rather than New England was the home of civil liberty. He was probably the first American "revisionist."

The real union of the teaching and the writing of history came when Professor John B. McMaster became the first Professor of American History at the University of Pennsylvania. Year after year with almost clock-like regularity the volumes of his famous History of the People of the United States came from his study while from his seminar emerged a series of distinguished scholars of whom three are now on your council. The tradition of his work has been carried on by our Department of History and by his disciple Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer. The Philadelphia custom of lay interest was perpetuated by such scholars as Henry Charles Lea, Hampton L. Carson, John Marshall Gest, Charlemagne Tower, Joseph Rosengarten, and John Frederick Lewis.

Philadelphia not only has produced historians, but has been earnest in collecting, preserving, and increasing the materials of history. At the birth of this interest, the genius of Franklin presided. Franklin
had an enthusiasm and talent for organizing institutions based on such sound ideas that they were destined to long life. In 1727 he brought his serious minded friends to band together in a debating and discussion club called the Junto where they gathered to tell and hear new things. After this was launched the American Philosophical Society. Reorganized in 1769 with Franklin as its President, the Society was thereafter known as the “American Philosophical Society Held at Philadelphia for Promoting Useful Knowledge.” Among its activities was the collecting of books and manuscripts.

Four years after Franklin saw his Junto begin its sessions of exposition and argument, he called upon his friends to join him in an effort to provide a subscription library, primarily for the benefit of the stockholders, but also to be available to the public. Here again he was successful, in 1731 the “necessary monies” were collected, and Thomas Hopkinson embarked for England with a list of books and a bill of exchange “securely packed against his heart.” He survived the perils of the deep and returned with the Library trunk stuffed with books. Among these volumes, history was by no means neglected. Thus the Library Company of Philadelphia, like the Philosophical Society, became a center of collecting. “Dictionaries, grammars and history,” says its historian, were its “staple fare” in these early days.

But Franklin was only twenty-seven, and his thirst for organized pursuit of rational pleasure had scarce been quenched. A learned society and a library must be joined by a school. Here his enterprise continued its propulsive influence until the College of Philadelphia emerged to be the first unit in the future University of Pennsylvania. The new college, too, began collecting books, though the study of history in those days, except as expounded by classic authors in ancient tongues, failed of inclusion in an otherwise particularly broad and enlightened curriculum.

Time does not permit, nor does the purpose of this description warrant further excursion into Franklin’s other organizations. Revolution and the reordering of the Commonwealth and the nation followed, and this city rather made history than studied it. But Franklin’s organizations were convenient depositories of many a priceless record of these historic events.

As the new century gained years and the nation grew more accustomed to its independence, a greater sense of the past dawned upon it. Here in Philadelphia this self-consciousness was marked by the
organization of a fourth institution. In 1824 The Historical Society of Pennsylvania joined in the work of gathering the sources of history. Furthermore, it provided a forum for historical discussion and the printed proceedings served as a medium for the dissemination of the ideas brought before it. Nor did effort cease here. As the years advanced more agencies grew up, some to survive, others to pass into the limbo of forgotten institutions, but the number grew until at present there are in this vicinity some 150 libraries.

The fruits of the collecting activities of these organizations frankly are as yet only partially comprehended by anybody. I shall hardly attempt a catalogue at this time. However, I wish to emphasize two characteristics of these resources, namely, their variety and their control.

The best known of our historical collections are those of the colonial and revolutionary periods. The great Penn and Logan collections of the Historical Society and the splendid treasure of Franklin manuscripts belonging to the American Philosophical Society are the outstanding examples. At the John Morton Memorial, Dr. Amandus Johnson has gathered a significant assemblage of Swedish colonial records which will be displayed in the coming spring at the tercentenary of our Swedish origin. The Pennsylvania German Society has labored successfully to gather the records of that important group of our ancestors.

For the Revolutionary epoch there is similar abundance. The Historical Society has the papers of Anthony Wayne, a great variety of orderly books and muster rolls, many broadsides and pamphlets and a notable number of Washington's manuscripts. The Philosophical Society has many of the papers of Nathanael Greene, the papers of Richard Henry Lee, those of General George Weedon, and a priceless collection of colonial and revolutionary imprints. The most striking item among these documents is one of Jefferson's preliminary drafts of the Declaration of Independence in his own handwriting. Of scarcely less interest is James Wilson's draft of the Constitution found in his papers at the Historical Society. For later times the Historical Society has the important manuscripts of James Buchanan, Henry Carey, Jay Cooke and many others, to speak only of the sources for political history. These collections are valuable but it is doubtful whether they are more valuable for the historian than other sections of the great variety which this neighborhood contains.
Equally great are the annals of American science gathered in Philadelphia. The American Philosophical Society has recorded in its published proceedings the findings of generations of American scientists. And in its files is much of scientific interest that is unpublished. The Academy of Natural Sciences and the Franklin Institute have important libraries. In the realm of medicine both the University of Pennsylvania with its chair in the history of Medicine and the College of Physicians, with its library second to none in importance, have gathered medical archives of great significance.

In the domain of culture, the sources are abundant. Philadelphia was the first literary capital of the republic and an active publishing center. Here appeared a number of almost forgotten magazines. Many of the early novels and more serious writings bear the Philadelphia imprint. The records of the publishing houses, the rare imprints, and the manuscripts of the authors themselves are, in some part, collected for the scholars' use. At the University of Pennsylvania particular attention has been given to assembling the annals of the stage. The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, again the oldest in the country, has in its collections and its records much of the story of our progress in painting and sculpture and its resources are supplemented by those of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and other centers.

The sources for the history of religion are even more abundant. At Haverford and Swarthmore colleges, the Society of Friends have extensive and valuable collections of the records and writings of the founders and their descendants. Nearby are the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia, the American Baptist Historical Society, and the Department of History of the Presbyterian Church. The Lutheran Theological Seminary, the Divinity School of the Protestant Episcopal Church, and Dropsie College have rich religious collections while the Henry Charles Lea Library at the University of Pennsylvania and the library of patristics at the Seminary of St. Charles Borromeo contain much relating to the medieval church.

In the field of the law, the libraries of the Bar Association and the law schools make their contributions. The late Hampton L. Carson, one-time Attorney General of the Commonwealth, was a great collector of Blackstone and other English legal commentators and his law library was bequeathed to the Free Library of Philadelphia.

Potentially Philadelphia is an important center for the study of economic history. The records of the Custom House extend back into
the pre-constitution era. There are a number of business houses, including the oldest banking and insurance firms in the country, which have extensive archives. The Girard papers in the custody of Girard College and the collections of the Historical Society throw much light on the pre-machine age of American business enterprise. We have yet to cope with the problem of handling the records of modern industry but a local committee will shortly be at work endeavoring to provide better means for collecting, preserving and interpreting such records.

Local history and genealogy naturally have a large place in the interest of so old a community. The Historical Society and the Genealogical Society have supported excellent periodicals for many years. The recently organized Pennsylvania Historical Association has its editorial headquarters at the University of Pennsylvania and is endeavoring to increase interest in the history of the Commonwealth as providing significant subjects for graduate research.

Such is the variety of the historical resources of this metropolitan area. But its very abundance has spelled confusion. Scattered among so many repositories this material has been difficult to control. However, this problem is on its way to partial solution. Some four years ago, we began an undertaking which has resulted in the preparation of the first regional union catalogue in the country. I refer to the Union Catalogue of the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area. Of the corporation which is charged with the direction and continuance of this project, I have the honor to be the chairman. This catalogue was inaugurated by a small group of your own members and has been made possible by the co-operation of local organizations and by the general patronage of interested individuals. We have here a fine example of the continuing influence of Franklin's interest in libraries in the fact that generous support of this project has been received from Franklin's own Philosophical Society. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania likewise gave liberally of its space and services for this great project.

The sponsors of this catalogue undertook to create an organization which would collect a central card-index of all the separate catalogues in the 150 libraries of the metropolitan area. At the outset, the project seemed almost impossible because of the great amount of labor involved, and the wide possibility of error in copying the individual catalogue cards. However, the WPA contributed labor, and science came to the rescue. The recent significant developments in the art of
photography as applied to copying were perfected in time to make the project feasible. The catalogues of these various libraries were photographically reproduced and cards were made by copying these photographs in a central agency where the work could be supervised and checked. Today, therefore, it is possible to go to The Historical Society of Pennsylvania and in one room find a complete catalogue of the printed material in all the libraries of the Philadelphia area.

This catalogue is useful only for printed material. It is supplemented, however, in a manner particularly valuable to the historian. For several years the University of Pennsylvania has been cooperating with the Federal Government in making an extensive survey and inventory of the archives of the federal agencies in this region. Also, the University has been interested in a project likewise sponsored by the WPA for cataloguing the sources in the various institutions and private collections. These surveys include manuscripts, newspapers, and maps. From these projects is emerging an extensive inventory which when complete will be available to scholars and will serve as an invaluable finding list. During the preparation of this inventory it is of more than passing interest to note that a mass of new material has been discovered, not the least notable being the papers of Simon Cameron, since deposited in the Library of Congress.

Valuable as these tools are to historians and other scholars, they do not meet the needs of those studying the complex problems of more recent history. At the moment, the University of Pennsylvania is studying an advance in connection with its plans for expansion at its bicentennial. We expect to amplify the functions and services of a library in the world of scholarship. We hope to build a new library building, equipped with all the devices of modern science, and serviced by a staff trained in the latest methods of assembling material and making it available to scholars. We feel that such a library can be made the bibliographical center of this region and can then really establish the controls necessary to make these historical riches available.

The more these new methods are made to fit the needs of the historians, the more valuable they will be to all scholars. For I need not remind this audience that in reality history is a pervasive project, or rather it is an all-embracing methodology which can be applied to all realms of knowledge. Hardly a scholar but at some time or other has to look behind the contemporary situation and whenever he does this, the scientist turns historian.

\[\text{Infra, p. 162.}\]
Such in part are the possibilities of Philadelphia as a center of historical research. We have done much, we intend to do more. We are endeavoring to make our abundance more available to your guild. On behalf of Philadelphia, its historical institutions, and particularly the University of Pennsylvania, may I express the hope that your visits to this great center may be increasingly frequent and profitable. We shall ever welcome you.

Thomas S. Gates