The Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Two Commonwealths*

The simultaneous publication of Hampton L. Carson’s History of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Guide to the Manuscript Collections makes possible an appraisal of the significance of the Society’s position in the world of history and suggests certain possibilities for those interested in looking ahead.

I

When a score of men, concerned by the fact that the history of the Commonwealth had not been properly “elucidated,” held that unhurried series of conferences in 1823 and 1824, they had visions, truly wide in scope. Their minds were confined by no limits save those temporal and spatial relations which bounded the interests and influences guiding the evolution of Pennsylvania.

They visioned an inclusive membership. As one of them put it, “It will be composed of men in the vigor of life and intellect, from whom labour may be expected, and such must be brought to the task

* An address delivered before the Society at the annual meeting on May 12, 1941.
if Penna. is ever elevated in this department of literature." Objection was made to the original plan to confine the membership to native Pennsylvanians and it was immediately modified. Also, the first president carefully stated "this association is not confined to one sex." He said:

Those to whom society is in every respect so much indebted, who confer on life its finest felicities, and who soften and allay the bitterness of adversity; whose attainments in science are only less frequent because they are habituated to content themselves within the sphere of domestic duties, but who have so often shown, that occasion alone is wanting for advances to the highest rank of mental improvement, they are not excluded.

On this side of the Atlantic, we have fewer evidences of female literature than in Europe. But there can be no pretence for supposing an inferiority of intellect. We must, therefore, account for it from a difference of manners. The simplicity of early colonization has not yet been wholly worn out. The wife, the daughter, or the sister, have still been contemplated, like the Lares of ancient mythology, as only the guardians and the ornaments of a sacred home. But without abridging these endearing characters, the wife, the daughter and the sister, may be admitted and encouraged to cultivate many branches of literature; to partake in the highest employments of mind, and often to assist, and sometimes to lead, in the pursuit and progress of the most exalted science.

In relation to the subjects embraced by this association, the cooperation of the female sex seems particularly desirable. Generally superior to man in closeness of attention, and retentiveness of memory, many of them are living records—sources of knowledge which inquiry will seldom exhaust.

This membership, vigorous and inclusive, was invited to form an organization with broad objectives. For not only was colonial and political history to be "elucidated" but the Society proposed "to ascertain and develope the natural resources of [the] state, to investigate its climate, soil, progress of population and other statistical points."

This breadth of view was further evidenced by the original organization of the Society's committees. Among them were three described as "on the literary history of Pennsylvania, on the medical history of Pennsylvania, on the progress and present state of agriculture, manufactures, and commerce in Pennsylvania." While among the first twelve papers published by the Society were "Notes on the Provincial Literature of Pennsylvania" and "A Brief Account of the Discovery of Anthracite Coal on the Lehigh"; a little later were presented "A History of the Introduction of Anthracite Coal
To promote these broad objectives the Society prepared a circular asking for state-wide support. This was distributed to people in all parts of the state with the request that material be sent embracing among other things:

- Topographical descriptions of cities, towns, boroughs, counties or townships.
- Accounts of the population, births, longevity, deaths, endemical or local diseases—facts relative to climate, meteorological remarks, general employment or peculiar customs of each district.

With this inclusive program the Society began its career in one room overlooking Independence Square, in the shadow of much of the nation's history.

Under the leadership of Rawle and Du Ponceau the Society sought not only to study the past but to keep abreast of current happenings so that a contemporary record might be kept. For example, shortly after the public school system was organized in the 1830's the president urged certain members of the Society who had been much interested in it to make a record and deposit the material which they had. Likewise as it was a period of financial panic and monetary controversy he felt that among "the fit subjects for the exercise of the talents of our members and correspondents" was "the credit and the bullion systems opposed to each other" and it was "a proper time, therefore, for study of the history of paper credit in Pennsylvania and our sister states, before and during the Revolution. But," he cautioned, "in investigations like these, let us beware of party spirit. Let not the monster be permitted to enter our halls... As philosophers and investigators of historical truth, we ought to rise above these noxious vapours, and breathe a purer atmosphere. Facts, and not party opinions, are what history demands of us."

The spirit of the 1820's and the 1830's was projected into the 1840's in spite of slow growth; so slow, apparently, that some one was moved to write to the newspapers in 1841: "We have a Historical Society that does little, a Historical Committee of the Philosophical Society that does less, and a William Penn Society... that does nothing. Thus with the necessary material for vigorously carrying on the siege, all hands lie down in the trenches and go to sleep! This state of things is discreditable to Philadelphia."
But these strictures were hardly fair. The interests of the Society were extending far. Under its order, a catalogue of papers relating to Pennsylvania and Delaware in the British Archives was prepared and published. The Society was promoting a successful effort in cooperation with the Philosophical Society to persuade the state legislature to begin the long series of printed *Pennsylvania Archives*. Also a new circular was sent out to all parts of the Commonwealth, arranged as Mr. Carson says "like a modern questionnaire, under fifteen separate headings, . . . [it] rivalled an old fashioned Bill of Discovery with its searching formulae." The response to this plea was most encouraging. Contributions, papers and materials came in from even the westernmost counties, Crawford, Venango, Beaver, Erie and Mercer. The Society was making itself felt throughout the Commonwealth.

In this decade the Society assumed its last great function and can be said to have reached the peak of its intellectual expansion. It decided to move to quarters where its books and other data might be arranged so they could be used. High time it was that this was done, for the situation in the city called for it. It was described by the first professor of American History in the University of Pennsylvania in an address before the Society in 1848 upon the occasion of the opening of the new quarters. Said he, "The City Library, of which we are so justly proud, is rather a library for distribution than reference, and will continue to be so as long as students are limited to the post-prandial twilight hours at which it is now accessible. No one in Philadelphia is supposed to want to study till he eats his dinner." So to meet these conditions The Historical Society began its career as a reference library, or as the speaker called it, "an 'Intelligence Office' managed by those who knew where all historical matters were to be found so that when the stranger student comes hither on an errand of investigation, we may render him the assistance he desires."

It is interesting to note also that he advised the Society not just to collect but to scrutinize original materials. He pointed out that such a society "ought to have within itself the capacity of making discrimination. If it has not, the chance is, that it will very soon become the receptacle of antique trash."

On the broad foundations of these first twenty years of thought
and planning the Society's corporate structure was built. Thence onwards a steady increase in members and endowment was attracted. Likewise those with cherished possessions felt that the organization was soundly established and might be trusted with their treasure. Most important the Society in even greater measure commanded the services of a loyal group of officers and staff who were indefatigable in their efforts to secure as complete a record of Pennsylvania's past as was possible.

They succeeded in their task. Within the walls of The Historical Society today are to be found the materials for the recreation of Penn's commonwealth. Here are his papers and those of his associates. Here are the records of the colony, of its relations with the mother country and of its independent growth. Here are the records of its civil and military struggles for freedom. Here likewise are the records of its expansion, the growth of its commerce, the emergence of its culture and the organization of its civil life. The Society's building is an excellent symbolic representation of that commonwealth. It presents to the visitor the niceties of Georgian form and decoration. This building in spirit represents gracious living, easy hospitality, the culture and refinement which marked those early days. It represents a mode of life based upon the integrity and high principle of the founder of the Holy Experiment: a life of fair dealing with the Indians, of civil and religious liberty; a life of reverence and piety. However, this way of living was not without its material side, there was much of the soil about it, of the agricultural life of the fat lands and fertile acres of the rolling country, creek and river valleys stretching from the Delaware westward. Then, too, there were commerce, ships, wharves, warehouses and counting rooms, banks, flour mills, blacksmith shops. Also there was politics, the politics of Wilson, of Bryan, of Mifflin, of Gallatin, of Dallas, of Buchanan, a politics which was practical and not always too high-minded, a politics based upon the emotions of farmers and artisans as well as gentlemen and editors. There was likewise a leisurely culture marked by easy courtesy, good living, comfortable elegance and tasteful furnishing. Of the commonwealth thus described, this Society has collected a relatively complete record and this building and its appointments stands as its symbol.
But in these latter years of the Society's long and notable history the commonwealth to which it has given such faithful service has been giving place to a new, a second commonwealth. This new commonwealth of Pennsylvania though identical in space with the first commonwealth is much different in time and in spirit. It is the order of more recent years, particularly since 1865, the product of more complex times.

The foundations of this new commonwealth are not so much the Holy Experiment, the pastoral habits and customs and the wealth of fat farms and wind-borne commerce. They are rather coal, steel and oil; steam and electricity. Even before the Civil War, but particularly after it, the energy derived from these resources and inventions began to dominate the commonwealth of quieter days. In large sections of the state the earth was covered by factories, the air was filled with smoke and grime and the nocturnal landscape was lit by a thousand furnace flares. A great population was drawn in large part from across the seas and huddled in masses at the threshold of these throbbing hives of mechanical processes. Wealth was created in unheard of quantity and like the hoard of the Nibelungs it lured giants to fight for its possession in certain titanic battles.

This outburst of energy disarranged and then reordered the pattern of the early days. Both wealth and poverty were increased. Distinctions which had hitherto been more or less ignored between groups in the scale of living now became the foci of discontent. Human suffering became more apparent. Efforts to improve the conditions of society became more widespread and more effective. Everywhere life was more complex, human relations more intricate.

During the emergence of the second commonwealth, the Society, busy with the record of the first, devoted little of its energy to capturing the story of this new order. The reasons are obvious and, from the standpoint of human nature, to be expected. This commonwealth of steel and coal and oil was too new, it was not yet history. Then too the smoother life of the first was more aesthetically satisfying to contemplate and explore, more culturally attractive to those trained in its amenities. In some small measure too it permitted escape from
a none too attractive present into a past soothing to a growing nost-
talgia.

It was natural, then, for the earlier workers to spend a century and
more on the record of the older commonwealth. It is just as natural
now for the present membership to begin to consider the obligation
to the record of the newer commonwealth, not only to secure this
record but particularly to enable the Society to so do its part that the
great achievements of the first may properly be brought to bear upon
the development of the second, so that some of the latter's glare may
be softened, some of its noise quieted, some of its rough edges
smoothed, certain of its more undesirable practices modified and ad-
justed to an older and more humane social ethics.

The Society has the serious responsibility of fitting its efforts and
its interest to the changing conditions raised by the new common-
wealth, by the history of Pennsylvania since 1865. The problems
presented are not easy and it will take much thought and discussion
to solve them.

These problems are difficult because the abundant energy of this
second commonwealth projected such a great variety of enterprise,
produced a much greater and more heterogeneous population, and
complicated human relationships in a manner hitherto undreamed
of. The result is a record which is highly complex, scattered,
voluminous and in large part ephemeral. The character of the prob-
lem of collecting and preserving this record can be more easily un-
derstood by examining some of its implications more in detail.

III

The history of Pennsylvania since the Civil War is dominated
by the economic and social changes incident upon the industrializa-
tion of the state. When it is finally written it must contain the story
of the great organizations which were brought about to assemble and
distribute the manifold products of the machine age. To write the
definitive story, a multitude of business records must be consulted
and their preservation and mobilization is a charge upon the Society.

In its record of the first commonwealth, the Society has a fine col-
lection of business records, ranging all the way from rude account
books of country mills and county forges to the great assemblage of
the records of the Bank of North America. But most of these records bear dates prior to 1865; relatively few are of the later period. The constant changes in modern business are frequent reminders of the timeliness of turning attention to these later records.

Naturally this needs careful approach. Few current business concerns would be interested in opening their records to students, nor could they transfer their files to The Historical Society even if there were room for them. The Historical Society's responsibility is rather to be on the alert for the records of concerns going out of business. Furthermore the Society, with its wide connections, might seek dead files or the records of subsidiary concerns which have joined a larger corporation. This plan was notably successful in obtaining the files of the Bank of North America. A third possible method of approach would be to make business firms historically minded and to urge them to arrange and preserve their own records.

It is quite obvious that this building cannot house even a mite of the great industrial records of the state. Here is an opportunity to work through existing agencies to promote regional understanding and to cooperate in bringing other historical societies to follow the Society's own pattern in other sections of the Commonwealth.

It may well come to pass that sufficient interest might be aroused among local business executives to cause them to set up a special endowment which would permit The Historical Society to have upon its staff an expert in business records charged with the direction of the program more or less described, who would not only care for the Society's business records, but would act as consultant to business executives and perform a community service.

The second grand division of the records of the second commonwealth is political. As in the field of economic records, the political archives which the Society has collected relating to the older commonwealth are outstanding. From Penn to Buchanan and the elder Jay Cooke, it is representative and reasonably complete but there it stops. Since the Civil War there are papers of no political leaders of importance and of but few of their subordinates. One of the Society's most distinguished presidents was governor of the Commonwealth, but none of his political papers are in its possession. Another distinguished president was attorney general but his papers are likewise elsewhere.
There is a certain reluctance to turn over papers of these recent times because they refer to people still living and events still fresh in remembrance. However, this reluctance can be overcome if the papers are accepted under seal, not to be examined until twenty-five years hence.

The deposit of these papers is most important and the reasons may well be discussed frankly. This was the period in Pennsylvania politics of Cameron, Quay and Penrose, of Wanamaker, Bullitt and Earle. It was and is a period of complicated political behavior. When it opened the composition of the electorate was changing rapidly. No longer were political workers solely concerned with farmers, artisans and the substantial city dwellers in business or the professions. Large masses of population, many of them of recent foreign origin, were now voters, actual or potential. These people, crowded in slums, easily led, were groups that could be mobilized for political purposes. They added an element to politics which had to be faced realistically and was. Political success depended in large part upon the control of much of this vote; it could not be secured by ignoring it.

Furthermore, the whole moral structure, built up before the wealth-creating power of machine production came to tempt human cupidity, was shaken to its very roots by the force of this great lure. As before stated, the newly discovered hoard of the Nibelungs tempted the titans and their consciences were bent and twisted in the conflict. This produced an ethical ferment worthy of the pen of the author of the book of Job because of its subtlety and bewildering complexity.

While this struggle was going on, while the political system of the Commonwealth was strained by its intensity, the story of it was reported. It was written by earnest and honest young newspaper men and advertised by political reformers in the heat of political campaigns. All honor to them, for most of them felt themselves crusaders in the cause of truth and honesty. But they were too near the scene, it was too complex for them to grasp its full meaning, they thought generally in terms of black and white and showed too little tolerance for the smudgy mass of grays that colors every social picture. Their picture is the picture which now is in the public mind and which now stands upon the page of history. It is a black picture, and
undoubtedly the conditions represented were bad enough. But there are many elements in danger of going unrecorded which while they do not whitewash, yet do demonstrate the complexity of the problem. Those who hold the records of these times can do no greater disservice to the actors in this tragedy than to destroy them, as is now so often done. The picture could hardly be blacker than it is, while the whole truth in the long run will probably modify and soften to a degree worthy of consideration.

The Society therefore should seriously work to secure the political correspondence of this period. It will be a hard task not only because of reasons before stated, but also because the telephone and quick rail and air travel have altered political correspondence. No longer do politicians pour their thoughts, plans, and procedures out upon closely handwritten four and eight page letters. Carbon sheets too do not preserve very well. But unless the story is to be left to the press, the effort is worth the making. Political leaders still occasionally keep diaries and memoranda. Political organizations keep books. Are they being preserved?

When it comes to the record of the social and cultural history of the second commonwealth of Pennsylvania, a third great task presents itself. Here likewise are the difficulties caused by the increasing complexity of human relations. But there are certain simple principles which we can follow. We can continue to watch the rise, progress, and occasionally the death of a great variety of social organizations in which we are all interested. They are the record of this great dawn of social conscience, this ceaseless effort for social freedom, and this strong creative drive for a vital and independent culture which have been the outstanding landmark of this period.

Here two great avenues of mobilization appear. The correspondence of civic, social and cultural leaders, of which we have so little for this period, should be sought. There is a disturbing tendency to believe that recent correspondence or diaries and letters preserved in the families of this more recent period can have no historic value. But they do, and it is an historical sin to destroy them.

Then, too, a multitude of organizations, charitable, fraternal, patriotic, religious, feminist, literary, artistic, musical, medical and historical, to mention but a few, all have records. The Society's friends belong to many of them. Are the members of this Society
doing what they can to stimulate proper keeping and preserving of these records, and to invite their deposit, here or elsewhere?

Also are invitations, programs, pamphlets, advertisements, appeals, propaganda, humor, ephemera of all sorts being preserved in representative sample lots? This creates a problem all by itself, but it is essential to solve it if the record of the social and cultural phases of this second commonwealth is to be preserved.

To sum up then, the Society has a problem which will press upon it more each year, the problem of preserving the record of this second commonwealth in the same degree of excellence which marked the efforts of earlier members in their great success with the record of the first.

IV

It is a challenging problem because it is so much more complex, the record so much more huge, and in many respects so much more ephemeral and so much harder to preserve.

So complex is the problem that the old methods will not suffice, new methods must be devised. This building in the future should be more a place of planning, more like a general headquarters where staff maps are consulted and field representatives sent out to work in other sections; a place of correspondence and conference, where cooperative enterprise with other agencies is encouraged and worked out. Also perhaps new endowment will make it a source of subsidy to promote these plans and carry them out. Finally, it may not be too much to prophecy that the digested results of these explorations, rather than the raw material, will be assembled in this Society and under its patronage the record of the second commonwealth can be truly made available.

The platform laid down by the founders in the first twenty years is broad enough to authorize and embrace this new effort. As a former president of this Society once said: "Our Society is not founded on the tastes of antiquaries, but in the philosophy of statesmanship."

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