Philadelphia's Boswell: 
John Fanning Watson

Watson's Annals is a familiar reference work to the student of Philadelphia history. Yet the banker with an avocation for antiquarian pastimes who compiled the Annals, John Fanning Watson, is little known.* Writers dismiss him as either an "indefatigable and irascible chronicler of early Philadelphia," or a "good but not entirely trustworthy old chronicler."1 Such judgment is unfair. Contemporaries knew Watson best for his valuable additions to local history. In focusing on personalities and amusing anecdotes, as they related to the grand theme of progress, he preserved many of the most striking adventures of the early settlers of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania.

To collect what he called "the dust of perished matter," Watson pioneered in such scholarly techniques as the oral history interview and the public opinion questionnaire. His concern for the historic artifact presaged that of the twentieth-century historic preservation movement. On the basis of his systematic study of American interior design and furnishings, published in chapters on "Furniture

* This study represents a revised version of a master's thesis submitted to the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture, University of Delaware, in May, 1971.
and Equipage” in both the Philadelphia and New York Annals, Watson has been called the “first historian of American decorative arts.”2

Pierre Eugène DuSimitière set a precedent for the Annals with his five volumes of scraps and fragments relating to American history collected during the Revolutionary War period. But Watson found DuSimitière “a dull Proser: one of those eccentric minds who gave his whole soul to schemes for which he had not adequate judgment or taste!”3 In 1811, Dr. James Mease issued The Picture of Philadelphia, a commercial handbook which incorporated an account of the city’s origin, increase, and improvements. In later editions of the Annals, Watson claimed that he originated the Picture scheme.4 Although Watson contributed to the first and sixth volumes of Hazard’s Register of Pennsylvania, the Historical Collections series prepared by John Warner Barber (1798–1882) are more closely aligned to his own publications. Both men were artists as well as historians, recording remnants of the past in picture and word. Barber allowed his curiosity to range over the history, topography, and buildings of many states. Watson focused more specifically on Philadelphia, which he toasted as “A fruitful theme of admiration for the historian & the Philosopher! The history of its Rise & Progress is curious & instructive, no other City has arisen to equal greatness in so short a time, by the industry & resources of its population! May its peculiar history, soon become a more popular study!”5 To this end, Watson dedicated forty years of his “spare” time.

II

Little in the heritage or upbringing of John Fanning Watson indicated that he would become an historian. The second son of

5 Watson, undated fragment, Society Collection, HSP.
William and Lucy Fanning Watson, he was born in Burlington County, New Jersey, on June 13, 1779. While his father, a sea captain and shipowner, served on various privateers during the Revolution, the family lived at Cooper’s Ferry, now Camden, New Jersey. Loyalist refugee raiders captured William Watson on the Jersey shore on November 10, 1781. First confined to the New York Provost, he was transferred to the *Stromboli* hospital ship in New York Harbor. Upon his release in 1782, Watson moved his family to Chew’s Landing on Timber Creek, Gloucester County, to avoid further contact with raiders along the Delaware. Following the end of hostilities, he settled in the Northern Liberties of Philadelphia. Active in the coastal provision trade, Watson carried butter and hams to Nassau in 1794, and undertook an expedition to Nova Scotia in 1801. Accompanied by his youngest son Wesley, he sailed to New Orleans in 1803. On the return voyage, they encountered a storm off Cape Hatteras on January 21, 1804, and were lost upon the shoals.¹

Lucy Fanning Watson, a Methodist mystic and poet, indirectly fostered her son’s antiquarian endeavors by transmitting to him her faculty for lucid remembrance of names, persons, and places encountered in her youth in Stonington, Connecticut, and Walpole, New Hampshire. Though often sickly in constitution, Mrs. Watson was spiritually robust. Her piety, correct deportment, fine understanding, and beauty brought her praise from her son and his friends.²

The extent and nature of Watson’s formal education are unknown. As a youth he obtained business training in the Philadelphia countinghouse of James Vanuxem, but in 1798 he offended the political bias of his employer by joining the Macpherson Blues, a militia company called up to aid in the suppression of the North-


ampton Insurrection, and was dismissed. Watson moved to Mount Holly, New Jersey, where he worked in the retail store of Major Richard Cox and Robert Davidson, and boarded with the Cox family. A trifling adventure in the sale of fans, which returned him double their cost, prompted him to write a self-congratulatory letter to his mother, in which he expressed certainty in his ability to become a respectable businessman, a conviction based upon his belief that industry and economy combined with ability assured wealth in the United States.

Two years later, feeling himself driven into what he considered involuntary exile by adverse fortune to gain a "small pittance which can but barely support a young man genteelly," Watson accepted a clerkship in the office of William Simmons, accountant for the War Department, and moved to Washington. There he boarded in a house run by William O'Neal, father of the notorious Peggy Eaton. Although the place was large and elegant with excellent fare, his fellow boarders were "vicious, democratic and dissipated . . . they perhaps hate me as I despise them. . . ." Generally, however, Watson found the raw, new city not as wild and terrible in appearance as he had anticipated. While employed by the War Department, he helped remove records when fire broke out in the office on the evening of November 8, 1800, and inquired in 1803 into the propriety and justice of several charges of corruption made by contractors and others at military posts from New York to Massachusetts.

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3 James Vanuxem was described as "a rather small-sized, neat and gentlemanly-looking man" who "was a merchant of some note." Abraham Ritter, *Philadelphia and Her Merchants* (Philadelphia, 1860), 83. The Northampton Insurrection was raised by the German settlers and others in Bucks, Berks, Montgomery, and Northampton Counties of Pennsylvania who opposed the House Tax law passed by Congress on July 9, 1798, to meet the exigency posed by the Quasi-War with France. Watson to John Spencer, May, 1842, Gratz Collection, HSP.


5 Watson to Mrs. Lucy Watson, July 21, 1800, "Family Letters," DML 58x29.15. "I can't bring to remember Mrs. Eaton the famous, & yet I must have seen her in the rought quarry-state, when I boarded a short time, with her Father." Watson to James Eakin, Dec. 27, 1832, Charles Roberts Collection, Haverford College Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection.

Through his War Department employment, Watson met General James O'Hara of Pittsburgh, who needed an agent for his mercantile ventures in New Orleans. Watson left Philadelphia on March 10, 1804, in the Lancaster mail stage, to take charge of O'Hara's operations. From Pittsburgh, he descended the Ohio, first by flat-boat and then in O'Hara's schooner Conquest, and reached New Orleans on May 26, 1804. In addition to handling O'Hara's business, Watson also acted as local liaison for the Philadelphia house of Hodgdon and Harris which held a contract to supply provisions to the American troops at various posts in Lower Louisiana.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Watson worried about the yellow fever which plagued Americans in New Orleans. "My Dear Son! Come Home!" she wrote. "If you are spared through this Season, don't venture it another." But Watson remained in the South until November, 1805, when he was able to depart with "$2500 clear money" in hand, and $1,000 on loan to a Philadelphia friend. To his mother he wrote that "I am happier than ever I have been before in life. I have now before me, various sure means of honourable living. I have attained just that standing, which while bereft of, picqued & worried my ambition."

Charges of misconduct resulting from Watson's handling of claims for General O'Hara, and from his activities in New Orleans as agent for the army provision contractors led to his publication on his return to Washington of a pamphlet entitled To the Public, in which he explained his actions, and presented correspondence supporting his position. "I... have left my business in Orleans solely to avenge my wrong." To intimidate Watson, the aggrieved parties brought an action against him claiming $12,000 damages in District of Columbia courts, and required that he post bond for that sum.

In the spring of 1806, Watson established himself in a book and stationery business at 22 Branch Street, Philadelphia. By 1814, he

10 [Watson] To the Public, 18; Watson to Mrs. Lucy Watson, Feb. 13, 1806, "Family Letters," DML 58x29.15.
was managing two shops, one at 51 Chestnut, and a second at 47 Spruce. According to an advertisement in the *Aurora General Advertiser* on February 2, 1812, he stocked the classics, but not what he later called "the idle & corrupt ephemera of the present day." New works available included *The Botanist* by Benjamin Waterhouse, Hannah More's *Practical Piety*, and John Cole's hymnal, *Episcopal Harmony*. To increase his sales, he sought recognition as the official bookstore for Gray and Wylie's Philadelphia Academy, and acted as a subscription agent for the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review*. Before long he married Phebe Barron Crowell of Elizabeth, New Jersey. Of their seven children five survived infancy.

With his purchase of a monthly digest, *Select Reviews, and Spirit of the Foreign Magazines*, in the summer of 1811, Watson entered the publishing field. He increased the size of the digest by sixteen pages per number, and illustrated each volume with three engravings, including a vignette title-page, without raising the subscription rate. Late in 1812, Moses Thomas bought the eclectic from him, and installed Washington Irving as editor. Following the magazine venture, Watson published an American edition of Dr. Adam Clarke's *A discourse on the nature, design, & institution, of the holy eucharist, commonly called the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper*.

While a bookseller, Watson pleased his mother by embracing religion, initially following his mother's Methodism but remaining within the Episcopal Church. He opposed those who indulged in "extravagant emotions and bodily exercises." In a volume entitled

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12 Phebe Barron Crowell (July 13, 1790-Feb. 11, 1859) was the daughter of Esther Barron and Thomas Crowell. Her first children, Lucetta Pollock and Angeline, died in infancy. Lavinia Fanning (Nov. 29, 1818-Mar. 30, 1900) married Harrison Gray Otis Whitman, son of Chief Justice Ezekial Whitman of Portland, Maine. Selena (September, 1820-Nov. 16, 1898) married Charles Willing, son of Charles Willing of Philadelphia. Barron Crowell (Nov. 15, 1823-1896) was educated at Dickinson College, became a physician, and in the 1850's, was a merchant in New York City. Myra or Almira (June, 1825-Oct. 18, 1861) never married, nor did her brother John Howell (May, 1830-July 17, 1908).

Methodist Error (1819), he published his belief that to “study to be quiet” was the best role for Methodists. In his endorsement of quietism, Watson echoed the sentiments of Hannah More, whom he much admired. Watson also authored The Pulpit Made Free (1822), an anticlerical polemic which stressed the notion of the priesthood of all believers. Supplementary illustrations for The Pulpit Made Free argument, and a book of “Gospel Doctrine” intended for school, missionary society, and home use, were compiled by Watson in 1826, but never published.  

The passage of the Pennsylvania Banking Act of 1814 initiated a new phase in Watson’s career. Among the forty-one banks chartered was the Bank of Germantown, whose directors on July 16, 1814, elected him cashier at an annual salary of $1,000. Offices of the Bank and Watson’s home were located at 5275 Germantown Avenue. Watson retained his position with the Bank until April, 1848, when the death of the Bank’s long-time president brought in a new slate of officers. Feeling that affairs had been managed for sinister purposes against him, he sought a new position, and accepted that of secretary-treasurer of the Philadelphia, Germantown and Norristown Railroad, which he held until his retirement in 1859.

He often lamented the confinement imposed by his employment, and looked forward with lively expectation to roaming over hill and dale, inhaling the air of other regions whenever possible. Frequently he made summer excursions without his family to such resorts as Cape May or Long Branch, or to areas of interest like the Mauch Chunk coal fields, or to Reading via the Schuylkill Canal. In the company of his wife, he visited Niagara Falls, and the Manahawkin Mansion of Health in New Jersey, and, with his daughters, toured the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal. It was on these trips that Watson began to keep journals as “remembrancers” of his experiences. “To note and observe” became his motto.

14 [Watson] Methodist Error (Trenton, 1819), 120; Watson “Trip to Cape May, 1822,” DML 58x29.2, 9; [Watson] The Pulpit Made Free . . . (New York, 1822); “Bible Thoughts,” HSP.


16 See various travel journals in DML, 58x29 group, and “Excursions & Notes By the Way by John F. Watson,” privately owned.
III

Watson’s rule for journalizing, to note whatever most surprized or interested him, became the selecting principle for incidents ultimately incorporated in the *Annals*,”¹ for it was to historical inquiries that the activities of the Historical Committee of the American Philosophical Society, the Penn Society, and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania prompted the transfer of his energies.

The need for an historical society in Philadelphia had been recognized long before March 17, 1815, when the Philosophical Society created its Committee of History, Moral Science, and General Literature, the purpose of which was to collect original documents and “such other papers as may be calculated to throw light on the history of the United States, but more particularly of this State, to be preserved among the archives of this society for the public benefit.”² Members of the committee included William Rawle, Joseph Parker Norris, and prison reformer Roberts Vaux. Dr. George Logan of Stenton, his wife Deborah Norris Logan, Thomas Jefferson, and Indian missionary-historian, the Reverend John Heckewelder, assisted the committee.

Paralleling the development of the Historical Committee was the Society for the Commemoration of the Landing of William Penn. This organization, which once again included Roberts Vaux and Joseph Parker Norris, as well as Peter S. DuPonceau, Robert Wharton, Thomas Biddle, Zachariah Poulson, Thomas I. Wharton and Watson agreed to dine together on November 4, 1824, at the Rising Sun Inn (the so-called “Letitia Penn” House) to celebrate the 142d anniversary of the landing of William Penn. Afterwards, Watson and Vaux agreed that the association should confine its activities to commemorative dinners, as an auxiliary to an historical society, which would conduct research and preserve antiquities.³

The Penn Society, as it came to be called, appointed Watson

¹ Watson, “*Diary of John F. Watson's Journey to New Orleans*,” DML 58x29.1, frontispiece.
³ “*Proceedings of a Meeting,*” undated clipping from *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, Am 301, II, 449, HSP; Watson to Vaux, Nov. 6, 1824, Vaux Papers, HSP; Vaux to Watson, Nov. 30, 1824, Am 30163, 61, HSP.
secretary pro tempore, approved a constitution, set life membership fees at ten dollars, and established October 24, 1682 (old style) as the date of Penn's landing. In recognition of his service, the Society elected Watson Curator for the 1826 term.

Watson’s excursions into oral history began with a letter published on March 6, 1821, in Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser, in which he suggested that elderly inhabitants relate facts respecting manners and customs of early times as they recalled them in Philadelphia. By 1823 he had devised a series of questions to ask “aged” persons. On April 8th of that year, Watson wrote Richard Peters, federal district judge for Pennsylvania from 1792 to 1828, requesting information about customs and dress, and old houses unusual in architecture or interesting in consequence of their former inmates, hoping that his questions would quicken Peters’ memory. The first question asked was “was there a Spring in Judge Shippen’s Garden where you used to sit & read Law.” Several referred to the ancient state of Dock Creek and its environs. Question fourteen requested information as to the location of “Guest’s first house in Philad called ‘the Blue Anchor Inn or Budd’s Row near Porvely Docks,’” which Watson wished to sketch. He admonished Peters to “try to tell all the traditions you have ever heard,” and also desired information about the woods near Philadelphia when Peters was a boy, with especial reference to sightings of bears and to summer recreations.

On behalf of Watson, Roberts Vaux inquired at the almshouse, but found no old people who could illuminate Watson’s queries. J. Jay Smith agreed to circulate a sheet of questions pertaining to the Revolutionary War “to any competent old person in the city.” Watson felt there must be several still alive who could tell strange or interesting facts. He sent Smith a copy of a questionnaire, “before used for such Enquiries,” to which Deborah Logan, Joseph Parker Norris, Colonel Allen McLane and others had responded. Individuals interviewed ranged from Quaker patriot Timothy Matlack to Abduhl Rahaman, a prince of Timbuctoo and former Natchez field slave. A “Respectable Quaker” living near Plymouth Meeting

4 Thomas Cadwalader Miscellaneous, Box 21 T, Cadwalader Collection, HSP.
5 Watson to Richard Peters, Apr. 8, 1823, Peters MS, XII, 24, HSP.
6 Vaux to Watson, Feb. 19, 1825, Am 30163, 78–79.
told Watson of the British Army and Lafayette at Barren Hill.\(^7\) Norris furnished "full 30 pages" of anecdotes.\(^8\) A description of Watson engaged in research is preserved in Deborah Logan's diary: "We drank tea and had a great deal of amusing chat. He constantly recurring to the 'olden time,' asks me questions which bring back the memory of departed and altered things, and elicits much that he likes to be acquainted with, in this way he does to others and obtains such a mass (but in its present state it is an heterogeneous one) of information."\(^9\) Watson preserved lists of his "Queries of Aged Persons" in his manuscript journal entitled "Summer Excursions 1825–1826," in his manuscript "Reminiscences and Old-Time Researches in New York . . .," and in his manuscript "Annals of Philadelphia, 1829."\(^10\)

Exercising critical judgment as to the reliability of his sources soon became important to Watson. He found that "in making the many enquiries that I have, respecting the antiquities of Philad\(^a\),, in which I had so many & various dispositions to consult, it would be a natural consequence, that I should sometimes encounter cases of perverseness, ludicrousness, or singularity."\(^11\) Richard Conyngham of Lancaster presented Watson with an anecdote about the naming of Pegg's Run which Watson termed "Sheer fable!" The historian elaborated:\(^12\)

This Paper may Serve to preserve a curious instance of the Fables which being often told are therefore most surely believed among us. The truth is, as I have shown in my book, that the Run was called after Danl Pegg the early owner of the adjoining land. It proves however that my researches have gone back beyond the times of popular tales, & that I have told things often without comment on the discovery, which none then knew but myself.

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\(^7\) Watson to Smith, Dec. 8, 1826, LCM, Yi 27299, F 63; "The British Army & Lafayette, near Barren Hill," Am 2705, unpaginated, HSP.

\(^8\) Watson to DuPonceau, Mar. 23, 1824, Gratz Collection, HSP.

\(^9\) DNL Diaries, Mar. 18, 1827, XI, 32, HSP.


\(^12\) Richard Conyngham to Watson, Jan. 30, 1825, Am 30163, 73–74.
When Watson interviewed "Old Butler," aged 104, about the French and Indian War, he obtained stories "all extremely picturesque & vivid; but at the same time, I was fully convinced of some striking discrepancies." Watson interviewed him again after an interval of six months, and was told "the same errors!"\textsuperscript{13}

To Judge Peters, Watson wrote "the changes of Philad within my recollection are now written out in 20 pages. . . . I have no doubt of making a book worthy to be read when you & I are gone. . . . I will enhance its value by not allowing it to be published in my time & only to be consulted in MS."\textsuperscript{14} At that time, he planned to give the completed manuscript to either the Library Company of Philadelphia or to the Historical Committee of the Philosophical Society, and initially aimed to secure "all such facts as do not belong to the dignity & gravity of history, & are not to be found in Proud & others; but which shall nevertheless furnish materials for raising works of imagination etc. therfrom such as Cooper's 'Pioneers' etc."\textsuperscript{15} He retained this orientation throughout his career.

In the spring of 1824, Watson sent several pages of his Philadelphia history to Peter S. DuPonceau for his perusal. "This much (and half as much more)," Watson wrote, "is actually executed for the benefit of the Philosophical Society." The original manuscript of three hundred pages, destined for the Library Company, Watson intended to rewrite in a form better adapted to publication. When completed, Watson proposed to give the revision to the Philosophical Society's Historical Committee, believing that his manuscript was a work of anecdote as well as of history, and in that respect "quite unique, being the copy of no other work known to me. I felt myself the Boswell of Philadel, & with his love of anecdote, related all which amused or surprised or affected myself."\textsuperscript{16} In April, 1824, Watson submitted an article entitled "Recollec-
tions of Ancient Philadelphia" to Poulson's American Daily Adver-
tiser with the expectation of awakening the public "to the utility of bringing out their traditions & ancient family records." While

\textsuperscript{13} Watson to DuPonceau, Dec. 22, 23, 1835, Society Collection.
\textsuperscript{14} Watson to Richard Peters, Apr. 8, 1823, Peters MS, XII 24.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{16} Watson to DuPonceau, Mar. 23, 1824, Gratz Collection.
the article brought him friendly praise—"You have already reaped a rich Reward for the Antiquary and Modern Philosopher by presenting a New World for their Speculations"—it had little practical impact.\(^{18}\)

Vaux lavishly praised Watson's manuscript as a "most original & interesting book." "It ought to be published; every citizen of Phil. & its neighborhood should possess a copy," he wrote. "The influence which a just view of our early times would have upon those who are now upon the stage of actions, as well as in relation to such as are to come, would be of the happiest character."\(^{19}\) Vaux recommended that the book be published by subscription: "The antiquarian & the moralist would unite in promoting an object of so much usefulness."\(^{20}\)

As for Watson's intention to furnish the Philosophical Society with the results of his labors, Vaux spoke with some authority, since he belonged to both the parent society and to the Historical Committee, when he declared that "no advantage will result from the possession of the work by that institution. It has collected much material for History, which will sleep the sleep of death."\(^{21}\) As an alternate course of action, Vaux told Watson that his proposal for an historical society was gaining friends, and he asked Watson to direct his work toward the infant society. "It would form a starting point, & would no doubt insure the foundation of such an association."\(^{22}\)

Watson assured Vaux that he was under no obligation to present any "History of Philad* antiquities to the Philosophical Society." His intention, as he had informed DuPonceau, had merely been to give the Philosophical Society a supplement of duplicate or additional matter which could not be incorporated into the body of his

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17 Sam Craig to Watson, July 11, 1824, Am 30163, 35.
18 H. C. Carey and I. Lea to Watson, July 1, 1824, Am 30163, 33; clipping, Am 301, I, 39; "We are desired to add, that those who are acquainted with any interesting facts or valuable unpublished documents relative to the subject, will gratify the author of 'The Illustrations' by communicating them to him." See Philadelphia in 1824 (Philadelphia, 1824), 12.
19 Vaux to Watson, July 22, 1824, Am 30163, 38.
20 Watson to Vaux, Aug. 12, 1824, Society Collection; Vaux to Watson, Aug. 23, 1824, Am 30163, 40.
21 Vaux to Watson, Sept. 28, 1824, Am 30163, 46.
22 Ibid.
work. Indeed, it had been his despair at the plodding of the Historical Committee which had reluctantly induced him to begin his collection. To Vaux, Watson now revealed a proposal of preparing his manuscript for the press and publishing it as a means of preserving its contents for posterity. As for giving the manuscript to an historical society, there was no reason why he should not. He concluded, "I may now say, I shall be very glad indeed to see an Historical Society instituted. It is what I much desire."23

Following the success of the first Penn Society dinner, Roberts Vaux and six others met on December 2, 1824, to found the Historical Society of Pennsylvania “for the elucidation of the natural, civil, and literary history of this state.” For fear that his bank directors might object, Watson refused any active or conspicuous role in the Society, but suggested the acceptability of an honorary membership.24 Subsequently, in a letter to the Society’s President, William Rawle, Watson urged a scheme for gathering local history through committees. Society members, appointed as special agents, would “rescue from oblivion, the facts of personal prowess, achievements, or sufferings, by officers & Soldiers of the Revolutionary War.” He also proposed that Rawle write to historical societies throughout the nation, and set them on like researches. In addition, local agents, so inspired, could gather incidents connected with pioneer settlement nationwide. Watson hoped this procedure would rescue fading legends and provide a collection of tales equalling those “best perpetuated in Song & Story among the Highland Clans.”25 Rawle was amenable to suggestion. He appointed ten special committees, the third of which was instructed to collect “biographical notices of persons distinguished among us in ancient & modern times.” To this group, Watson’s proposals were referred.26

Following his own advice, Watson promoted his local history scheme by writing to Edward Everett of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and learned that Everett hoped his proposal would stimulate the Massachusetts Society to new efforts and researches.27

23 Watson to Vaux, Sept. 30, 1824, Vaux Papers.
24 Watson to Vaux, May 9, 1825, ibid.
26 William Rawle to Watson, Sept. 28, 1825, Am 30163, 103.
27 Edward Everett to Watson, Nov. 15, 1825, Am 30163, 111.
In the interest of uniformity, Watson’s manuscripts were to be the model for writing up all finds. Watson also corresponded with Samuel Preston, of Stockport, Pennsylvania, author of articles on the “Old Times” published in the Bucks County Patriot. He agreed to forward to Preston information and documents in hopes that they might be “useful in rescuing from oblivion many interesting facts that now only linger in the recollections of a few old men.”

On November 30, 1826, the Bucks County Patriot ran an article entitled “Antiquities of Pennsylvania” which mentioned favorably Watson’s letter in the Chester Upland Union (November 4, 1826) about his visit to Chester:

MR WATSON, of Germantown, has been indefatigable in collecting and preserving whatever related to the early history of our state. Original letters, manuscripts of various kinds, pamphlets [sic], &c., and his collection of varieties of this kind is not excelled by that of any person in the United States. These valuable materials are not kept locked up in his private library, a plan too often adopted by the possessors of treasures of a similar kind, but are open to the inspection of every friendly inquirer. To this collection Mr. Watson is constantly endeavouring to make additions: so that it may some day become a rich legacy to the history of our state.

The results of explorations into topics outlined by Watson in his letter to Rawle were compiled by Watson in a manuscript volume entitled “Historical Collections,” which he presented to the Historical Society. Watson felt the poverty and imperfection of his own contributions would encourage those of others. Obvious defects of style he dismissed as irrelevant. “Leave it to Posterity to adorn them with the ornaments of rhetoric & composition. They may be sufficiently thankful if we can only succeed to furnish them, in this way, with the rough materials!” In addition to donating the “Collections” volume, Watson disclosed his intention to present to the Society at a future date the manuscript copy of his Annals, “a work, in which much that is rare, curious, & amusing, of the olden time, will be rescued from the oblivion to which it was re-

28 Watson to Samuel Preston, Sept. 19, 1826, Society Collection.
29 Bucks County Patriot, Nov. 30, 1826, Am 3013, 191.
30 Watson, Jan. 1, 1827, foreword to “Historical Collections,” Am 3013, iii.
ceeding."

By so doing he was to fulfill a pledge made to Vaux in 1824. In March, 1827, Watson announced to both J. Jay Smith and Deborah Logan his hope of rewriting the Annals manuscript for the press during the coming summer.

After completing the revision, Watson sent the manuscript to Smith, who found too many quotations in the text. Watson countered: "Are not quotations 'little apples of gold in pictures of Silver!' They indeed look like pedantry or vanity, as I am aware, when brought into the public gaze: but I had only private purposes, something to amuse myself & children after me." In further comment on his methods, he wrote: "I preserve autographs of the Pilgrim Fathers, Several Drawings of things and houses as they were & even patterns pasted on my leaves of Dresses actually worn, also drawings of strange dresses, one by Maj Andre's own hand, a card of Genl Howe to[j], Paper Money etc. My book is a perfect Museum of things surprising me, equal to 500 pages of this sized Mss. When I meet with facts not precisely suited for myself I give them to the Historical Society bound up in book."

In addition to materials gathered orally and from questionnaires, Watson mined the newspapers. By 1823, he had consulted Philadelphia papers from 1727 on. From the Pennsylvania Gazette and others he extracted notices about the postal system, agricultural produce prices, and what he called "Varieties from the Gazettes, &c." Archival research also proved useful. J. Jay Smith provided him with extracts from the Minutes of the Philadelphia Common Council from 1704 to 1775. Watson took data found in William Penn's letters to his chief steward, James Harrison, to illuminate the history of Pennsbury. Information on land distribution in Germantown was verified by the existing surveys and plats. Facts on the state of the Indian nations Watson drew from a report by George Croghan, Sir William Johnson's negotiator with the Indians at a treaty held at Pittsburgh in 1759. The archivist at Harrisburg copied curious facts from the oldest records for Watson, who found

31 Ibid., i.
32 Watson to Smith, Mar. 16, 1827, LCM, Yi 2 7299, F 81.
34 Watson to Samuel Preston, June 14, 1828, Society Collection.
35 Annals (1830), 224, 626–627, 648.
that he knew more about the records than did the archives staff. This he ascertained by observing their eagerness to hear him relate and explain curious facts. "They can't therefore be depended upon at all for any help to you in any examination," he wrote DuPonceau. "They will give you books & Treaties only."  

The Philadelphia Recorder of Wills allowed Watson to make inquiries about the descent of property, particularly respecting the Letitia Penn House. Maps, as well as documents, proved valuable. A copy of the Thomas Holme "Portraiture of Philadelphia" from the plate owned by the Logan family aroused Watson's interest. He found discrepancies in the exhibition of the watercourses of the several creeks.

To supplement and confirm facts obtained from other sources, Watson sought archaeological evidence. He recorded facts about "made Earth" or fill, and natural earth in Philadelphia, in an attempt to ascertain colonial levelling patterns within the city. "Sub-terrene and Alluvial Remains" connected with Pegg's marsh meadows included fragments Watson tentatively identified as part of an ancient mill, and a sword found at a depth of eighteen feet. Demolition of the western wing of the State House disclosed a keg of flints, a dozen bomb shells filled with powder, and the entire outfit of an army sergeant. For Watson the Dock Creek area posed the greatest archaeological difficulties. Judge Peters was asked why wharf logs were found six feet underground in Chestnut Street on the east side of Whalebone Alley, parallel with Wister's pavement. Perhaps they had formed an abutment to an early bridge over Dock Creek. Watson requested Vaux to inquire of masons and diggers of cellars in the new lots in Arch Street when and where they encountered fill in digging foundations, and secured information about trees twenty to thirty feet under the extant ground level in that

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36 Watson to Vaux, Sept. 26, 1825; Watson to DuPonceau, Dec. 21, 1835, Society Collection.
37 Watson to Smith, Feb. 10 [1827], LCM, Yi 2 7299, F 77.
39 Watson, "Tuckerton Beach," DML 58x29.3, appendix; *Annals* (1830), 211–214.
41 Watson to Richard Peters, Apr. 8, 1823, Peters MS, XII, 24.
area, and of spatterdocks, a type of common yellow waterlily, at Sixth and Arch Streets.\footnote{Abbott, 1974: 19}

Illustrations for his Annals were an important aspect of Watson’s over-all scheme. At first he made rough sketches of Philadelphia buildings and scenes to accompany his manuscript notes, but in 1824 he sought an artist to produce finished versions of his various outlines. From Vaux he requested neat colored drawings of Doyle’s house, and of the Letitia Penn House, if they could be done by an amateur to cost Vaux nothing. Watson also asked that the person sketch from memory the great Friends meetinghouse on Second and High Streets.\footnote{Abbott, 1974: 43} In 1825, he informed Vaux that “I have made an engagement with a competent hand, to take me about 2 doz views of ancient Edifices etc in Phila. Several are from description. They will be very interesting. Among the most interesting to you are the Bank Meeting, The old 2d St Meeting & High Str. with the Court House, Friends Alms House, Laetitia Court.”\footnote{Abbott, 1974: 44}

In the spring of 1826, Deborah Logan noted in her diary that Watson had visited her that afternoon, and had brought with him a person whom he patronises who can sketch, and several of the views done by this gentleman, some from view’s [sic] of existing objects, and some from my friends description of the olden time. They all drank coffee with me, and the conversation elicited was very entertaining to me, who can get back into by-past-days with great facility, and look upon all time lost, when I am with antiquaries, that is spent in modern discussions. They staid with me ‘till night, and I hope the artist saw some views that will hereafter give employment to his pencil.\footnote{Abbott, 1974: 45}

In December, 1826, Watson had as many as “30 perspective good Drawings of ancient houses & places in Philadelphia, as they were in the beginning, or 70 & 80 years ago!”\footnote{Abbott, 1974: 46}

The unnamed artist whom Watson commissioned to do this work was W. L. Breton, an Englishman who had recently arrived in Philadelphia. The earliest extant documented water color by Breton

\begin{footnotes}
\item[42] Watson to Vaux, Mar. 25, 1824, Vaux Papers. Watson recorded additional “Curiosities and discoveries, generally of a sub-terrene character” from both Philadelphia and New York in the Annals (1830), 653-658.
\item[43] Watson to Vaux, Nov. 6, 1824, Vaux Papers.
\item[44] Watson to Vaux, Sept. 26, 1825, Society Collection.
\item[45] DNL Diaries, Apr. 13, 1826, IX, 128.
\item[46] Watson to Smith, Dec. 8, 1826, LCM, Yi 2 7299, F 63.
\end{footnotes}
is "State House—at Phila tech 1825." Breton recorded the Carpenter Mansion on Chestnut Street above Sixth prior to its demolition in April, 1826, in "Side and back view (NE) of the late residence of the Honble Judge Tilghman, decd taken in 1826."47

Although scholars have traced Watson's first encounter with Breton to a chance meeting along the Wissahickon in the spring of 1828,48 Breton is mentioned by name in a letter written by Watson to Smith on May 26, 1827, when Watson sent Smith a water color of Charles Thomson's residence, "Harriton," by Breton as a gift, and enclosed additional Breton water colors, requesting Smith to sell them at fifty cents each. This request Watson explained as intended to oblige Smith's friends "as well as the poor artist. I could procure many more . . . when we consider the time & travel to execute any given subject, they are really dog cheap! The picture called 'Baptist Meeting house Lower Merion' is a Thomson picture. It is the church where C. T. always worshiped . . . All his 25cts pictures refer to in the letter, I have made my own."49 Subsequently, in an undated letter transmitting the journal of his 1827 excursion to Niagara Falls, Watson thanked Smith on behalf of Breton for securing subscriptions to the water color series, but noted that Breton was "too evanescent to be at any time sure you are affording him any permanent benefit. I shall inform him what you have done. I wish he was at Niagara & along my tour drawing there!"50

In the only article published on Breton, Martin P. Snyder concludes that the strong antiquarian streak in Breton's work, especially his ability to convey a "primitive" atmosphere, proved the catalyst in the author-illustrator relationship.51 In preparing the illustrations for the 1830 edition of the Annals, Breton had access to Watson's sketches and descriptive materials. A comparison of the

47 These drawings are at the HSP. Other copies, which Martin P. Snyder decided were executed later, are "SE view of the Residence of the late Chief Justice Tilghman—taken in 1826—which during the Revolutionary War, was the Residence of the Minister of France," Athenaeum of Philadelphia; and an untitled copy signed "WLB," Library Company of Philadelphia.
49 Watson to Smith, May 26, 1827, LCM, Yi 2 7299, F 93.
50 Watson to Smith, ibid., F 110.
51 Snyder, "Breton," 181.
finished lithographs with Watson's originals shows that the sketches were always used in obtaining the lines of the buildings. Breton chose the background. The Letitia Street House ultimately appeared in the country surroundings of its original setting, and the London Coffee House became the scene of a slave auction. Only Breton's rendering of the Pegg's Run scene dissatisfied Watson. Breton chose for his model a Watson sketch emphasizing the pasturage and irrigation aspects of the creek, although Watson had also included in his manuscript an attractive skating scene for the view. In noting sketches available for reference in the Library Company *Annals*, Watson listed "Pegg's run, and scenery in skating there," and appended the following comment: "the picture, as a skating scene, is more to the ideas in my mind, than the one given in this work. There were difficulties in forming the pictures of 'things before,' which the present artist could not overcome."

By September, 1829, Watson was discussing with Smith publication of the forthcoming *Annals* to subscribers, following Vaux's scheme. An endorsement by members of the Historical Society would aid sales, he believed, as well as an appendix on New York written from notes he had gathered in 1828. "I wish I was done!" he declared to Smith, "My MS book for the Historical Society just bound up is 600 pages. One for your Library is 350 pages." Although these volumes were complete in themselves, they did not comprise the whole from which the published version was formed. Articles from the "*Annals of Philadelphia . . . 1829*" manuscript appeared in the succession in which they were written, exhibiting not only the facts, but also "the proper History of their attainment."

By December, 1829, the *Annals* were in press, but the printing advanced slowly. Watson found that despite his trimming and pruning the book threatened to grow to be 800 octavo pages, with twenty-six plates executed by Breton and printed by the Philadelphia firm of Kennedy and Lucas. Dividing this burgeoning opus into two volumes, he feared, would frighten off readers. In the

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52 *Annals of Philadelphia* (1830), 735.
53 Watson to Smith, September, 1829, LCM, Yi 2 7299, F 144.
54 Watson, "*Annals . . . 1829*," Am 301, I, 3.
55 Watson to Vaux, Dec. 9, 1829, Society Collection.
56 Watson to Smith [January, 1830], LCM, Yi 2 7299 F 150.
meantime, a controversy arose over the price charged by Breton for half-page lithographs. Watson consulted his publishers, Carey and Hart, after the prints were pulled but prior to making payment:

Mr W L Breton charges me the same price for each 2 lythographs done on one 8 vo page, as he does for one large one filling the same page, saying he found it more difficult to do little ones than big ones, & had rather have done large ones at less than little ones. I thought I had understood that he would do each 8 vo for a given price whether it had one or many subjects. What I wish in the premises is that you might enquire . . . of Mr Childs or Kearney, what is their practice & if Mr. Breton's idea is not unconventional or unusual I shall acquiese in his version. . . .

Before the required edition was printed, at least one and probably two of the stones broke, and the pictures had to be redrawn. Changes in details appeared, including the addition on some plates of attribution to Breton and the Kennedy and Lucas firm. The view of the “Stone Prison at Philadelphia, 1728” was redrawn in reverse so that its entrance incorrectly appeared on Third Street instead of on Market.

Early in June, 1830, Watson informed Vaux that the Annals were to be through the press and in the shops within the month. He desired to print with the preface an endorsement by the Historical Society. This request promptly produced the following resolution:

That the Society being informed that John F. Watson, Esq, one of its members, was about to publish a work entitled “Annals of Philadelphia,” which having been examined and found to be authentic, curious, and highly interesting in many respects, it is highly recommended to the patronage of those who feel an attachment to our city, and take an interest in its primitive character.

Ordered, that a copy of this resolution be furnished to John F. Watson, Esq.

Roberts Vaux Vice President
Joshua Francis Fisher, Secretary p.t.

57 Watson to Messrs. Carey & Hart, July 13 [1830], Gratz Collection.
58 See Snyder, 194, n54. The Library Company of Philadelphia has three copies of the Annals (1830) with varying plates.
59 Watson to Vaux, June 5, 1830, Society Collection.
Although strictly an individual enterprise, publication of the *Annals* was thus encouraged by the Society. Watson was the first author to carry on a title page the phrase “Member of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.” By gift to the Society on June 20, 1830, he placed in its archives three folio volumes of manuscripts, in accordance with his earlier promises.

Upon the publication of his book he presented copies to friends who shared his affection for “olden time enquiries.” He also used these individuals as salesmen by including with the gift copy additional copies to be sold at three dollars apiece. Congratulations flowed in from all quarters. The New-York Historical Society made him an honorary member for his New York postscript. Zachariah Poulson, editor of the *American Daily Advertiser*, took six copies to give to friends. John Vaughan and others invited Watson to dinner and loaded him with compliments. Immediately following publication, the author received sixteen unsolicited votes for Germantown Town Clerk.

The *Annals* carried out Watson’s goals as stated to Judge Peters in 1823, and to DuPonceau in 1824. As in his 1827 “Historical Collections,” he furnished rough materials from which “better or more ambitious writers could elaborate more formal history and from which as a repository, our future poets, painters, and imaginative authors, could deduce their themes, for their own and their country’s glory.” The title page defines the volume’s scope.

*Being A Collection Of Memoirs, Anecdotes, & Incidents Of The City And Its Inhabitants From The Days Of The Pilgrim Founders, Intended To Preserve The Recollections Of Olden Times, And To Exhibit Society In Its Changes Of Manners And Customs, And The City In Its Local Changes And Improvements.*

To achieve this end, Watson balanced a narrative history chapter, like the “Epitome of Primitive Colonial and Philadelphia History”

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61 Watson to G. N. Barker, July, 1830, LCM, Yi 2 7370, F 30.
62 DNL Diaries, July 29, 1830, XIII, 62, 64; Watson to Smith [July, 1830], LCM, Yi 2 7299, F 119.
63 *Annals* (1830), iv.
(pp. 7–35), against one of "Facts and Occurrences of the Primitive Settlement" (pp. 59–94), in which extracts from the Minutes of the Assembly of Pennsylvania and Minutes of the City Council from 1704 to 1776 are reprinted. Watson regarded the footnote as an addition to or explanation of the text rather than as a voucher for the validity of the statement. He included citations directly in the text. Although the Annals lacked a bibliography, Watson included a "Catalog of Ancient Publications, Illustrative of our early History . . .," available from either the Library Company or the American Philosophical Society (pp. 48–50).

Not all Philadelphians applauded the Annals, or its author's intentions. Although Walsh's National Gazette encouraged Watson to continue his labors, its editor also observed: "Mr. Watson has so long been living in spirit with those who lived on earth some fifty or a hundred years ago, that he has imbied a strong affection for ancient modes and customs, and seems to think the former state of society preferable to the present." His delvings into the origins of Philadelphia settlement offended the sensibilities of some local grandees. To his friend Smith, Watson complained: "Several 'base mechanicals' stand at the head of several present opulent & haughty families! Much they hate those old books, & such modern ones as 'Annals'! Even Mr. Walsh deems it in bad taste to mark localities & names of ancient Tanyards."

The ready sale of the Annals, despite such criticisms, surprised many Philadelphia booksellers. Six hundred copies of the first edition of one thousand were sold before Uriah Hunt took the remainder of the printing.

IV

Following the success of the Annals of Philadelphia with its postscript on the history of New York City, Watson issued a smaller volume entitled Historic Tales of Olden Time New York (1832), for the home and school market. He hoped to make incidents of the past popular by first delighting his audience with "the comic and

64 Clipping from the Philadelphia Gazette, July 31, 1830, Dreer Collection, CLXXXVI, 3.
65 Watson to Smith, Feb. 28 [1831], LCM, Yi 2 7299, F 185.
strange of history,” and afterwards winning them to graver re-
searches. As in the preparation of the *Annals*, Watson utilized
archival research and oral history, recording from “living chronicles”
materials to serve as sources for “future works of poetry, painting,
and romance. It is the raw material to be elaborated into fancy tales
and fancy characters by the Irvings, Coopers, and Pauldings of our
country.”¹

Watson perceived a difference in the spirits of the two cities he
chose to immortalize. As early as 1823, he predicted that New York
would be the greatest commercial and financial center in the nation.
Its air of show and attraction in all activities indicated to Watson a
spirit of rivalry and enterprise not visible in Philadelphia.² He
corresponded with Dr. David Hosack of the New-York Historical
Society and sent the Society accounts of Captain Kidd, an account
of the *Empress of China*, the first American ship out of New York
for Canton, and copies of Isaac Norris’ letters respecting the yellow
fever of 1793.³ While visiting Mrs. Watson’s sister, Mrs. James
Bogert, Jr., in New York during the summer of 1827, Watson con-
tinued his research and sketched an old bakery, “being built of
brick and white plastered, which seems to be one of the oldest style
of houses now extant in New York. . . . It is a very public place; is
but one story high & about 15 feet wide on Front, a board Roof.”⁴

Watson derived the bulk of the material for his *Tales* from Joseph
White Moulton’s *View of the City of New-Orange (now New York)*
as it was in the year 1673 (1825) and from his private research.⁵ The
“Olden Time Researches & Reminiscences of New York City done
by J. F. Watson in 1828,” 153 manuscript pages, covers such topics as
“Primitive New York,” “Memorials of Dutch Dynasty,” “Dress,
Furniture & Equipage,” and “Ancient Edifices.” As in the Philadel-
phia manuscripts, Watson sketched old buildings still standing, in-
cluding No. 76 Pearl Street, which he described as being built of
yellow Holland brick with a tile roof. He also prepared, from verbal
descriptions, drawings of the Stadt Huys and Herberg, built in 1642

³ David Hosack to Watson, Aug. 13, Nov. 16, 1823, Am 30163, 1–2, 5–6, 15.
⁴ Watson, “Trip to Niagara,” DML 58x29.5, 18–19.
⁵ Watson, *Historic Tales of New York*, v.
and dismantled in 1700, and the Stuyvesant Huys and Customs House.  

Watson informed J. Jay Smith of the publication of his New York book on November 9, 1832, and mentioned that a companion volume for Philadelphia (Historic Tales of Philadelphia) was in press under E. Littell’s supervision. He requested Smith “When you read it, don’t abuse it. Should it generate any kindly feelings from your pen in the Saturday Bulletin, send me a paper, as I have no means here to see that Paper.” The Saturday Evening Post commended the book to the public as in “every way worthy of public patronage.”

For his first New York book, his research among New York antiquities was completed in a two-week visit to the city in 1828. However, continued investigations ultimately resulted in his preparing for the press “a New York book of 500 pages 8vo.” This became Annals and Occurrences of New York City and State in the Olden Time: Being a Collection of Memoirs, Anecdotes, and Incidents Concerning the City, Country, and Inhabitants From The Days of the Founders, published by Henry F. Anners of Philadelphia in 1846. His mode of composition and layout was one of scissors and paste, “to avoid the labour of writing out the pages of the Annals.” The printer was given a list of manuscript articles in Watson’s “Supplementary Annals,” which were to be severally incorporated where required into the body of the new volume. As a general rule in bringing into the text the “additionals,” Watson instructed the printer to use his discretion in changing wording to make “the added article to fit & dovetail into the leading tenor of the whole text.”

In the Annals of New York, Watson gave a picture of the hardships of early pioneers, wrote of Indians, and included an appendix, “The Great Conflagration of New York, December, 1835,” with supplemental notes estimating the cost of destruction wrought by the fire. Two books were included in the volume. The first covered New York State in general; the second focused on New York City,

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7 Watson to Smith, Nov. 9, 1832, LCM, Yi 2 7299, F 193.
8 Clipping dated Dec. 22, 1832, Dreer Collection, CLXXXVI, 269.
9 Watson to ———, Feb. 4, 1842, Helena Hubbell Collection, 2-33, HSP.
10 Watson, “To the Printer!”, Dreer Collection, CLXXXVI, 246.
after the model of the 1828 manuscript. Proof sheets for the second book, with Watson's corrections, are at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Some materials from the Philadelphia Annals were used. The chapter on longevity opens with mention of the Philadelphia silversmith John S. Hutton, accompanied with a cut (pp. 289-290), which appears in the 1830 Annals (pp. 510-511). In "Reflections and Notices," Watson included observations on the current scene. He found "the sombre granite heavy walls and little unadorned windows" of Astor's great "Mammoth Hotel" prison-like. Houses around Washington Square he thought copied after the Philadelphia manner in red brick, with marble sills, steps, and window tops.

Although Watson wished the public in general to read his instructive volume, by 1853 he still held one hundred copies. "The New Yorkers have not been very favourable, so they say, to the idea of a Philad making a New York book," Watson informed a Philadelphia bookseller.\(^{11}\)

In 1855, Watson offered to sell the copyright, woodcuts, and stereotype plates for the New York Annals to George L. Duyckinck and Charles Scribner in hopes of achieving greater circulation. Watson described his work to Duyckinck in the following terms: "It occurs to me to say, of my New York Annals, that no other work in existence, has so much of what was derived, from facts of memory, 'to amuse and instruct,' concerning the past, as my book. I told my facts like Michelet Vol 2 p. 364. Official records (since published,) are not of such materials, as my observations. So said Genl Morris of the Mirror, who highly commended the work. So too, also, Dr. Francis. These two gent\(^{11}\)a have said that it has no compeer. I mention these facts for your government." Despite such recommendations, Scribner and Duyckinck did not purchase the Annals. Shortly before his death, Watson visited New York to gather materials for a "Final Appendix of the Year 1860," and planned to issue a new edition. His final remarks were a jeremiad protesting change and "progress." He opposed extravagance in dress, the opera, the envelope, and great cities "first realizing the characteristics of great deserts."\(^{12}\)


\(^{12}\) Watson to George L. Duyckinck, Feb. 12, 1855, Duyckinck Collection, New York Public Library; The Historical Magazine, IV (September, 1860), 228.
While preparing his *Historic Tales of New York* for the press, Watson continued his Philadelphia investigations. Unable to attend the meetings of the Historical Society, he proffered his resignation. Ultimately, he was elected a corresponding member, and in 1849 the Society added his portrait to its collection.\(^{13}\)

After the publication of *Historic Tales of Philadelphia* (1833), which were derived in substance from the *Annals*, and cast in the form of instructive stories, Watson compiled a manuscript supplement. This, as previously noted, became the basis for the *Annals of New York* and for subsequent editions of the Philadelphia study. Perhaps a dozen drawings of curious buildings along the Delaware River, executed by Breton about 1835, were intended for the supplement. An undated memorandum headed "List of Old houses, to be drawn by W. L. Breton to have ped houses, porches, hanging down shutters &c, & glazed bricks," in Watson's hand, is probably of the same period. Though none of Breton's 1835 drawings and water colors have been linked to the descriptions, they depict similar structures.\(^{14}\)

Watson and other members of the Penn and Historical Societies had long revered the great Treaty Elm, blown down in 1810, as marking the site on which Penn held his treaty of peace with the Indians. In 1835 Watson discovered that no instrument in writing had been signed under the tree. A treaty, he discovered in the Harrisburg land office, was negotiated by surveyor Thomas Holme in 1685.\(^{15}\) Watson conveyed his findings, and his puzzlement to DuPonceau.\(^{16}\) His study on the subject appeared in *Memoirs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania* (1836), a decade after Roberts Vaux's "A Memoir on the Locality of the great treaty between William Penn, and the Indian natives in 1682" had appeared in the same publication. Dr. James Mease, author of *The Picture of Philadelphia*, issued a leaflet "On William Penn's Treaty with the Indians," summarizing the discussion of the treaty notion and lauding Watson's publication which corrected the faulty *Annals* account. As Mease noted, "hitherto, anyone who had the boldness

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13 Watson to Smith, May 28, 1837, LCM, Y II 7299, F 185; Jno Pennington to Watson, Aug. 19, 1841, Dreer Collection, CLXXXVI, 295; Membership certificate, *ibid.*, 294.
14 "List of Old Houses—to be drawn—by W. L. Breton . . .," Society Collection.
16 Watson to DuPonceau, Dec. 29, 1835, *ibid.*
to even hint the possibility of a doubt of every position respecting it, as given by him in his "annals," or by the Historical Society, was denounced as guilty of something like historical treason, and was charged with the crime of 'unsettling venerable traditions,' &c &c, as if historical truth were not more valuable than any tradition..."\(^{17}\)

Watson completed a revision of the Philadelphia *Annals* in 1842. He predicted it would require two octavo volumes of six-hundred pages each.\(^{18}\) Although the artist was about seventy years old, Watson asked Breton to sketch Carpenters Hall. To supplement Breton's work, Watson requested John McAllister to ask James W. Queen, a principal draftsman and lithographer for P. S. Duval, "to sketch a final draft of the Centre House from Hills map. I don't want a finished one; but only the idea, so as to have it just near to my view of the Old Waterworks on Sckl & Spruce Strs, perhaps a vignette to the other. . . . Your Christ Church view will answer, when I have need of it, for the artist's use, not now required."\(^{19}\)

Thomas Howland Mumford, a wood engraver, prepared the blocks after the Breton drawings and pen-and-ink sketches by his brother Edward W. Mumford, now in the Sachse Collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia. Barrington and Haswell printed the cuts. C. W. Murray completed the stereotyping of the first volume of 650 pages on September 25, 1843, and the second of 500 pages on February 16, 1844.\(^{20}\) John Pennington and Uriah Hunt published the edition. The following puff for the new set appeared on the cover of *Littell's Law Library* for August, 1844:

**WATSON'S ANNALS OF PHILADELPHIA**

New, improved and enlarged edition.

The original edition of this truly interesting work was published in 1830, in one octavo volume, and was sold for $3. It has long been a scarce book, and second hand copies have been purchased at auction for eight

\(^{17}\) Am 301, I, 371.

\(^{18}\) Watson to Smith, Sept. 27 [1840], LCM, Yi 2 7299, F 248.


\(^{20}\) Dreer Collection, CLXXXVI, 353.
dollars. The able and indefatigable author, John F. Watson, Esq., of Germantown, who has been styled the “Homer of his class,” has been induced to put forth a new and greatly improved edition, in two handsome octavo volumes, embellished with many curious engravings, illustrative of primitive manners and scenes, for the low price of $4 per set.  

To the original manuscript, Watson added a chapter covering “Progress and State of Society,” particularly changes since 1800. He mentioned the tariff debates of 1833, the increased elegance of public edifices, the silk and mulberry speculation of 1838–1839, and the Panic of 1840. An appendix of excerpts from his travel journals and other manuscripts concluded the second volume.

George Lippard, Germantown novelist and editor of the Quaker City Weekly, reviewed the second edition in a two-part article in the Daily Chronicle. He found the style not Johnsonian, but the designed object accomplished, judging that goal to be the erection of a massive monument of the past for the admiration of future times, “a temple where old-time memories should be enshrined. . . .” Lippard regarded Watson’s work as one of a cluster of brilliant exceptions to the then degraded state of American literature. The review brought Watson what he termed “praise enough for any private man!”

Although Watson intended the Annals to be his final literary product—“I meant to be done; when I had finished the Annals, and I have done! . . . I have jealous lookers-on, who’d not like to hear of my being further engaged in such inquiries, so I am resolved, individually to be done, and the field is therefore fully open to others . . .”—J. Jay Smith persuaded him to assist in preparing a volume of facsimile American autographs. Their American Historical and Literary Curiosities included miscellaneous items taken from Philadelphia collections, with a short text for the amusement and instruction of their own and future generations. From the American Philosophical Society, Watson sought contributions from the papers of Vergennes and Franklin concerning the Revolution, Benjamin West on the painter John Trumbull, Noah Webster’s 1786 scheme for Americanizing spelling, and from John Law the

21 Ibid., 365.
22 Clipping in ibid., 349.
23 Watson to Horatio Jones, Jr., Mar. 6, 1845, Society Collection.
Mississippi Bubble promoter. To justify his request, Watson explained his purpose as bringing into view “the hidden and curious past.” The Society granted access to the Franklin papers in which Watson planned to “dip into each paper with a swallow’s wing, working quickly & hardly to pick up here and there some grains of wheat.” The popular success of the publication warranted issuance of six editions.

In 1850, the two-volume edition of the *Annals of Philadelphia* was re-issued by A. Hart, J. W. Moore, J. Pennington, Uriah Hunt, and H. F. Anners. Illustrator W. L. Breton was still working at eighty-two, as a letter of Watson’s in the spring of 1855 indicates: “Mr. Britten [sic] told me he had engaged himself a residence in Rising Sun Village, so perhaps in or near Nice Town. He was seeking one in Gernt. . . . I suppose he has all the houses and places, you ask about, already drawn, especially that of the Monastery. We should be glad to see him at my house in Gernt. He has a good one of the rocks near Rittenhouse P[aper] mill. . . .”

Breton’s death on August 14, 1855, ended his production for Watson, who possessed about two dozen water colors which he “had done up in colour, by Breton, intended to be paid for, by Mr Penn in EngI’d. Some years ago, he & Genl Cadwalader, who was to pay for them, about 50 Drs, had left them on my hands.” These Watson offered to either antiquary Ferdinand J. Dreer or John McAllister. Watson offered to give McAllister a picture of the Wharton House (Walnut Grove) or any other one or two views as an acknowledgment of his many attentions and favors: “I have other copies of them all (enough for my own keeping) done in Sepia, prior to their execution on Wood, as exhibited in the Annals.”

The final *Annals* edition issued during Watson’s lifetime appeared three years before his death with the addition of a “Final Appendix of the Year 1856, Notes and Reflections on Social Changes and Progress in General.” Elijah Thomas purchased the wood engravings, stereotype plates, and copyright for $6,000, and copyrighted

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24 Watson to George Ord, Nov. 30, 1846; Watson to [APS], Dec. 14, 1846; Watson to Ord, Jan. 6, 1847; Watson to Ord, Jan. 9, 1847, APS.
25 Watson to Horatio G. Jones, Jr., Apr. 20 [1855], Am 3712, HSP.
26 Watson to John McAllister, Nov. 24, 1855, LCM, Yi 2 7380, F 9; Watson to McAllister, May 20/21, 1856 *ibid.*
the work in 1857. At Watson's demise, Thomas' unpaid balance of $4,000 appeared as a doubtful asset in the estate. In 1879, the final volume of a new three-volume edition of the _Annals_ appeared. It contained a memoir of Watson and other supplementary materials prepared by Willis P. Hazard, son of Samuel Hazard, editor of the _Register of Pennsylvania_. Perhaps the best summary of Watson's involvement in historical inquiries is Watson's own reflection on the _Annals_: "The public in general have very little conception of the really pleasing character of olden time enquiries. They view the volume as so much accumulated facts, attained, as they suppose, by laborious delving and exploration & enquiry. They wholly overlook the real poetry of the subject, the stimulus & the gratification, which a mind duly constituted for the pursuit into, acquires by opening to itself the contemplation & the secrets of a buried age." Though Watson found kindred spirits among the memberships of the Penn Society and the fledgling Historical Society of Pennsylvania, his fifteen-year association with Deborah Norris Logan of Stenton, the noted female historian, and his life-long friendship with J. Jay Smith proved historically more fruitful. Deborah provided documents relating to James Logan and William Penn, personal memoirs, and artifacts to assist Watson. In return, she felt it her prerogative to edit Watson's writings on subjects of personal interest. Smith, whom Watson called a disciple, frequently acted as a research aide. Apparently, Deborah Logan met Watson in the spring of 1823. In her diary entry of May 25 of that year she commented that Watson provided entertainment at tea that afternoon by telling of his explorations of old houses. He stayed about six hours, "indulging

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27 Register of Wills, Philadelphia, 1861, no. 4, Will Book 45, 29. Elijah Thomas issued the _Annals_ in parts at twenty-five cents a number. A copy of Number 20 in a private collection bears the following inscription in Watson's hand: "Mrs. Phoebe B. Watson from the Author."

28 Watson, "My Annals—& my reflections thereon," Dreer Collection, CLXXXVI, 11.

1 References to the Deborah Norris Logan Diaries (DNL Diaries), HSP, were located with the help of an appendix to Barbara Jones' "Deborah Logan" (master's thesis, University of Delaware, 1964).
in Antiquarian lore.” After that initial visit, Watson, whom Deborah called “the Antiquary,” frequently took tea at Stenton.  

On February 22, 1824, Deborah “frittered away the day in looking over Watson’s Book and writing a little in it.” One evening, Watson showed Deborah a “Book of the Letters of Distinguished Men,” with facsimile autographs, and accompanying portraits. A portfolio containing views of old Philadelphia houses entertained her when Watson came to tea on June 19, 1826, with his daughters. Some of the sketches she regarded as “pretty and true”; others, taken from description, were “too fanciful and extended.”

Earlier, in August, 1825, Deborah had acknowledged that Watson was a “very pleasant friend and neighbour, no new acquaintance that I have made for many years being more agreeable.” The qualities of sagacity and perseverance which Deborah recognized in Watson’s “original mind” were essential to the success of his historical studies. Nevertheless, these became a source of conflict between the two. Despite the possession of acute historical sensibilities, neither Deborah nor Watson acquiesced in the twentieth-century view that all information regarding an individual or action should be presented to form a “well-rounded” picture of the past. In editing the Logan papers, Deborah tried to quash the publication of anecdotes and domestic chit-chat which she felt would blur or darken historic images. Occasionally her judgment ran counter to that of Watson, such as the question of the propriety of publishing a letter from Charles Thomson, Deborah’s cousin, to W. H. Drayton of South Carolina about John Dickinson, to whom she was also connected.

Here the difficulties began with Watson’s visit to Harriton in December, 1824, to take a general appraisal of Thomson’s books and papers. From memoranda, Watson sent Deborah an account of what he had viewed, and he set forth sentiments with which she was pleased, “respecting the sacredness of letters written in the confi-

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3 DNL Diaries, Feb. 22, 1824 VI, 160.
5 Ibid., June 19, 1826, IX, 173.
Two years later, Watson sent Deborah a short biographical sketch of Thomson’s life, which she found inadequate, and a second paper entitled “The Revolution.” The latter upset her greatly. In her anxiety, she wrote “I entreat him in a note which I shall send him presently not to put it out of his hands until I shall have the pleasure of seeing him. . . . To say truth I was far from satisfied with either the Biography or the Paper annexed. . . .” Deborah based her objections on Watson’s treatment of a letter found in Thomson’s papers addressed to Drayton concerning the roles of Thomson and John Dickinson in arousing anti-British sentiment in Pennsylvania prior to the First Continental Congress. She wished him to suppress the document, and refrain from presenting his Revolutionary War study to the Historical Society.

Realizing the futility of argument with a determined lady, Watson replied “I shall make the difficulty respecting Genl Dickinson & Genl Reed &c a short affair by expunging the whole of it from the intended gift to the Historical Society. I will by no means, at any time, write a word that ‘may give a pang or cause a maiden’s blush.’ I deem it therefore good luck, at least, that it has so early met an objection from a quarter so likely to have been afflicted by what I deemed to have been the sense of the record.”

Deborah’s cousins, John Dickinson’s daughters, shown the offending letter to Drayton, were provoked by Watson’s interpretations sufficiently to feel it injured their father’s reputation, which they considered “unimpeachable . . . and they appreciate your motives but think you read the matter & construed it wrong at all events they want the matter set right before it is deposited with the Historical Society. . . .

The controversy was outwardly resolved on January 15, 1827, when Deborah received a note from Watson “in which he inclosed the objectionable document as surrendered to me to do as I pleased.
with, without keeping any copy of it for himself: I felt exceedingly obliged by this procedure, and not a little pleased that my respect for him and opinion of his good Principles have received such a confirmation.”

In her acknowledgment, Deborah called Watson’s action “a practical illustration of the Christian Principles of doing as we would be done by.”

Once family honor became the criterion for judgment of historical fact, Watson had difficulty in pleasing the Logans. As he prepared the chaos of his collections for the press, Deborah asked to see the chapters in which she was interested in time to correct any errors “before the Press has set seal to them.” Items making honorable mention of her husband’s ancestors and corresponding to her own “traditionary recollections” received approval. Deborah also assumed the role of intermediary between the author and her Dickinson cousins. She feared they would hold her accountable for errors which violated their interests. Watson accepted this censorship, and brought newly drafted portions of the Annals manuscript for Deborah’s scrutiny when he came to visit. She suggested he observe greater accuracy, avoid flights of fancy, and deflate his style.

When the Annals appeared in 1830, Deborah dreaded to read it “from a fear of my too-oft-recurring name. . . . Besides tho’ it may seem ungrateful to complain, he has given much of the information derived from me not exactly as it ought to be, mistakes occurring continually.” Her son Algernon and Cousin Sally Dickinson found innumerable errors in the volume. All condemned “the Abominable Style” in which Watson wrote.

Despite this the author continued to visit her and exchange “antiquarian lore.” After reading a manuscript of gleanings Watson made while in Harrisburg lobbying for the recharter of the Germantown Bank in 1835, Deborah complained that the objects of his searches were often petty, and his hand illegible. By 1838, how-

14 DNL Diaries, Jan. 16, 1827, X, 160.
15 Deborah Logan to Watson, Jan. 17, 1827, Am 30163, 194.
16 DNL Diaries, Dec. 23, 1828, XII, 154.
17 Ibid., Aug. 22, 1828, XII, 47.
18 Ibid., Mar. 7, 1829, July 22, 1829, XII, 171-172, 239.
19 Ibid., July 15, 1830, XIII, 54-55.
20 Ibid., July 21, 26, 28, 1830, XIII, 56-57, 58-59, 60.
21 Ibid., May 23, 1835, XV, 191-192.
ever, all disagreeableness engendered by the *Annals* had vanished. Deborah recorded that after guests had departed one September day, and she had washed the dishes and cleaned the closets, "I came to write, but lighted on neighbour Watson's 'Annals' and found so much Entertainment in it, and so much of my own information that it has beguiled the morning from me and I have not made up a clean cap for the afternoon." Her death on February 2, 1839, terminated a profitable, though often restraining, friendship. On the announcement of her funeral, Watson wrote "Truly she was a woman to be lov'd & wept!"

Watson enjoyed being an antiquarian if "only for the love it generates among the brotherhood, all so wholly purged of all selfishness, & all so cordial and in unity of object & taste!" He freely shared his queries and materials with other historians. A series of questions about the moral character of George Washington was sent to George Washington Parke Custis as a guideline for a biography. Custis rejoined that they would be answered in reminiscences he occasionally published in the press. Watson referred Jared Sparks to facts in his manuscript folio in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania collections, gleaned from the Charles Thomson papers, as well as for anecdotes respecting Washington. William Dunlap, author of the *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (1834), corresponded with Watson while writing his biographical sketch of Benjamin West. In return for Watson's information on early Philadelphia painters, Dunlap was to contribute material on New York and its vicinity for the *Annals*.

Watson's chief disciple was that enterprising Philadelphia entrepreneur descended from the Logan family, J. Jay Smith, who was born in Burlington, New Jersey, in 1798. Smith came to Philadelphia as a druggist's apprentice and may have met Watson in the course of peddling his home manufactured durable ink to Philadelphia booksellers. With Watson's assistance, he was elected Librarian of the Loganian Library, and of the Library Company of Philadelphia,

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22 Ibid., Sept. 15, 1838, XVI, 361.
23 Dreer Collection, CLXXXVI, 354.
24 Watson to Horatio Jones, Jr., Aug. 26, 1845, Society Collection.
posts he retained from 1829 to 1851. For varying periods, Smith edited the Pennsylvania Gazette, the Saturday Bulletin, the Daily Express, Waldie's Select Circulating Library, and Downing's Horticulturist.26

In addition, he assisted Watson in his projects, and served as his messenger in the city, ferreting out bundles of family papers that related to Watson’s interests and confessing that Watson had gotten “so provokingly beyond us that I hardly know what will be useful to you.”27 Among the privileges which the two shared, Smith counted “the friendship of the admirable Stenton lady. It is no small one certainly to enjoy the refined society of such rare beings, we shall hardly appreciate it till she is removed.”28 Deborah enjoyed their amiable company. After one extended visit, when, by the fireside, the three had discussed “Characters and times by-past, and raked up from oblivion old anecdotes and things,” Deborah sought the proper color of antiquarianism. She decided “Gray with the Rust of Years” the most suitable.29

Watson and Smith shared a delight in collecting artifacts with historical associations. Having stumbled over a “queer thing” at his sister’s, a certificate of Thomas Lloyd to England, Smith wrote Watson “If I envied people ever, that passion would arise sometimes at your possessions, such things as you hoard are not everyday affairs, have this advantage over a Bank note even, that they will pass, when the Bank (not Germantown of course) is forgotten, but you have so fairly earned your stock that I would fain increase rather than subtract from it.”30 In Burlington, Smith discovered some relics from Pennsbury Manor. Particularly exciting to Smith was William Penn’s desk, now owned by the Library Company of Philadelphia. “It would be something to view one’s self in the same mirror as he did,” he wrote. He secured the feet of the desk, and promised Watson a pair to be used as mantle ornaments.31 Watson congratulated Smith on his prowess. “You are a true Disciple to

26 John Jay Smith, Recollections (Philadelphia, 1892), 64, 222; Watson to Smith, May 13, 20, 1829, LCM, Yi 27299, F 141, F 142.
28 Smith to Watson, Feb. 21, 1827, ibid., 204.
30 Smith to Watson, May 2, 1827, Am 30163, 223.
31 Smith to Watson, May 8, 1827, ibid., 229.
have ferreted out such rarities! My mantle shall fall upon you!" He agreed to use the desk feet and to purchase the then detached door mirrors as Smith suggested.32

The wives of both master and disciple regarded antiquarian pastimes wryly. When Smith sent Watson "a most flattering" gift, Watson acknowledged it pleased his wife much more than his antiquities.33 Smith’s wife once questioned Watson’s sanity. Watson replied: "Tell your wife I am not mad, for there’s ‘method in his madness.’ Boswell’s wife was always jealous of Johnson, as misleading her husband from home-duties! See Johnsons letters about her & to her, propitiating her!"34 He summarized his relationship with Smith when he noted that Smith’s letters, included in his “Supplemental Annals” and “Correspondence” scrapbooks, were both amusing and flattering. "Thus," he wrote, "‘your bark shall attendant sail’ down the stream of time with mine! Whew! how we apples swim!"35 In contrast, Smith dismissed Watson with a single phrase in his autobiographical chronicle of personal achievements.36

VI

Philosopher Archibald Alison in his Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste (1790) observed that objects which have been devoted to patriotism or to honor affect viewers with all the emotion of the qualities of which they have become significant. Beauty of natural scenery is exalted by the records of events it has witnessed. The scenes most deeply affecting the admiration of the people are those which became sacred by the memory of ancient virtue or ancient glory.1 Watson, by example, endorsed Alison’s views and quoted him in the Annals (1857, II, 15). For Watson and the new American nation, the virtues and glories to be celebrated were those of the founding fathers and the Revolutionary leaders.

32 Watson to Smith, May 11, 1827, LCM, Yi 2 7299, F 90.
33 Watson to Smith, Mar. 3, 1827, ibid., F 80.
34 Watson to Smith, May 26, 1827, ibid., F 93. On Feb. 4, 1842, Watson wrote "I have a house full of queer relics, & yet am not myself queer!" Helena Hubbell Collection, 2-33, HSP.
35 Watson to Smith, December 20, Miscellaneous, Manuscript Division, New York Public Library.
36 Smith, Recollections, 283.
As a conservor of Philadelphia's physical past, Watson focused on preserving the "Letitia Penn" House. "My desire is to get the ownership of the 'Laetitia House,' for the sake of its perpetual preservation, as a memorable City Relic, worthy to be held in perpetual remembrance, as the actual contrast, at all times, between the beginning & the progress of our city." In 1824, he began collecting documentation supporting his belief that the Rising Sun Inn in Letitia Court had been the house of Penn's daughter. He tried to locate the exact house through descriptions given in Penn's letters. Deborah Logan assisted by looking for a letter giving an account of Letitia Penn Aubrey's estate "Engulphed somewhere in the massy papers" in the Stenton Library. She was half-inclined to "believe that the old house in the Court with the carved wooden Pediment over the Door*[Watson's note: now the old Rising Sun on the Western side] may have been the one in which our Great and good Founder once resided; but a reference to the title Deeds (I should suppose) would satisfy and the investigation is in excellent hands."

In 1827, Watson proposed joining others in the purchase of the Rising Sun Inn. He suggested an adaptive use for the interior, turning the rooms upstairs and down into single halls, while maintaining the original exterior. The renovated building would house the Penn Society office and exhibitions of paintings and antiquities relating to early Philadelphia. He felt the Historical Society might be willing to travel down "the steps of time" to take up quarters in the basement. Although his proposal gained little support, Watson continued his research with the help of Smith. He questioned the origin of the brick used in the house's construction, and whether its beams were hewn or sawn. Following Deborah Logan's advice, he urged Smith to spend a rainy day in the Recorder of Deeds office running over the earliest books there to see "any strange or amusing facts in Wills." Watson also corresponded with Roberts Vaux about

2 Watson to Smith, Feb. 22, 1834, in extra-illustrated copy, Smith, Recollections III, HSP.
3 "Memoranda, respecting Letitia Court & Black Horse Alley deduced chiefly from J. Chews Brief annexed," Am 301, I, 140, 144-145; Watson to Gavin Hamilton, Apr. 29, 1824, ibid., 142; Watson to Thomas Bradford, May 12, 1824, Bradford Collection, Correspondence 1821-1839, HSP; Deborah Norris Logan to Watson, Feb. 2, 1825, Am 30163, 75; DNL Diaries, Feb. 1, 1825, VII, 210.
4 Watson to Smith, Feb. 7, 1827, LCM, Yi 2 7299, F 76; Watson to Smith, Jan. 3, 1830, ibid., F 148.
salvaging the Letitia House, hoping that Vaux would call on the owner and induce him to keep the premises as they were until some action could be taken. Watson had previously extracted the owner's promise not to remove the pediment, the chief peculiarity of the building. "I told him it would be to his lasting credit to become a member of the Penn Society & to offer them the preference of the house at the lowest terms as an act of public beneficence. . . . I even volunteered to put on the roof myself. . . . 50 shingles would save it." Subsequently, Watson asked Vaux to call on Isaac T. Longstreth in Church Alley for the oldest record of the Letitia House, and take notes of relevant dates and names. Watson warned Smith that if he allowed the owners to sell the Letitia House so that it might be pulled down "I'll haunt your name through life. When it can be bought I'll buy it.""5

In 1834 he outlined a comprehensive development plan for the old building, based on its purchase by either the city or by Watson and Smith jointly. If the pair bought it, Watson hoped the city would voluntarily exempt the house from taxation. The inn would continue operation as a public house, on the temperance plan, rented to a respectable widow or to a small family of good character. Furnishings for the "historic house" would include Penn's looking glass, desk, and high chest. Watson planned to hang water color views of Philadelphia by Breton from his collection in the various rooms. In conclusion, Watson wrote: "I shall be deeply mortified if the apathy of Philadelphians should allow the house to be pulled down . . . such a house with its pictures, & various old furniture, sanded floors, pewter plates & porringer etc, would be a perfect museum, where many of our citizens could be brought to deposit of their old relics. The thing is certainly feasible." Smith rejected the scheme. Watson appealed to John Penn-Gaskill for assistance. With Penn-Gaskill's refusal to act, Watson dropped his proposals.

In 1835, Joshua Francis Fisher, Secretary of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, attempted to revive the project. Again, Watson suggested using the Inn as a temperance house to serve farmers from the Jersey market. As to furnishings, Watson felt:

5 Watson to Vaux, Feb. 6, 1830, Vaux Papers.
6 Watson to Vaux, Oct. 30, Society Collection, to Smith, no date, LCM, Yi 2 7299, F 121.
7 Watson to Smith, Feb. 22, 1834, in extra-illustrated copy, Smith, Recollections III.
The house should be in all respects old-fashioned, the floors should be sanded, & the chief of the dinner & supper ware should be old pewter. The whole manner should revive the picture of olden time. We could get contributions enough of all old high-backed chairs, settles & Settees, pictures & looking glasses. ... We might get up quite a museum of old fashioned dresses, house ornaments &c. The beau ideal of the whole, as I can see it, is quite fascinating.  

By 1856, the razing of "our two most notable houses," the Letitia House and the Slate-Roof House, seemed imminent. Watson proposed a system of historic site markers, marble or cast-iron plaques bearing sculptural representations of the former edifices, to be attached to replacement structures. Although the Letitia House was spared, demolition of the Slate-Roof House occurred in 1867. Only Breton's water colors, and a few bricks and timbers remained. 

Pilgrimages to the "hallowed haunts" of "splendour past" was another aspect of Watson's homage to previous eras. A visit to Pennsbury, "once the Farm & the Mansion House of Wm Penn the Founder," undertaken in the company of Reuben Haines of Wyck, Germantown, on July 8, 1826, typifies these excursions. The gentlemen "intended to explore & investigate the remains of that once distinguished place now gone down & in ruins." Watson sketched remaining buildings and noted curious anecdotes about the area in his journal. The following year, he visited Chester, accompanied by Smith, "to see and examine the venerable Remains of that once distinguished Town in the earliest Annals of Penn."

On an excursion to Graeme Park, Montgomery County, in 1855, Watson acted as historian for a group of members of the Historical Society. His reflections on the past were interspersed with anecdotes of Graeme family history and a description of the house: "There it still stands as an empty disused structure. ... The mansion is 60 feet front of two stories high built of the Red schale stone of the Country, has a door & 5 windows below. Six windows on 2d

8 Watson to Joshua Francis Fisher, December, 1835, Joshua Francis Fisher Collection.
9 Watson to Townsend Ward, Dec. 16, 18, 1856, Society Collection.
10 Watson, "Trip to Pennsbury & to Count Survilliers, 1826," DML 58x29.4.
11 Watson, "Visit to Chester in 1827," Am 2705, 1.
story & 4 dormer windows. . . . Windows on its double pitched roof.”

Watson collected moveable memorabilia as well as sketches of “olden time.” Like a medieval canon, he sought to increase the fame of Penn’s city with sacred bones. His fervor had few counterparts. A memoir of Watson in the hand of Evart A. Duyckinck comments that he left a rare collection of relics, autographs, and other items at the time of his death. Duyckinck noted that Watson preserved with pious veneration mementoes of his parents, and “that they might always be thus perpetuated, each contains attached to some hidden part, a written history.”

Watson’s bedroom, as described by his daughter, reveals an early collector “living with antiques.”

Near by his bedside stood his old secretary, at which he wrote, containing his most valuable papers and writings, and by it, that venerable chair of PENN, made more remarkable by having seated Prince William and Lafayette. In the corner was an old clock-case, belonging to the same family, with a tray holding seven canes of relic wood; the walls were hung round with pictures of ancient houses, scenes, &c, all framed from some portion of the woods represented; and from two of the windows were suspended cannon balls, placed there but a few days previously; one was from the Battle of Germantown, presented by Benjamin Chew, Sen., Esq. The other reads, “This Ball is a curiosity. It is older than Philadelphia: was found imbedded in the root of a large tree-stump, in a house of Budd’s long row. J. F. Watson, 1836.”

Watson felt his collecting miscellany required an explanation. The exhibition of a mummy in Philadelphia in 1824 gave him an apt occasion to justify the preservation of some Relics . . . which but for such countenance, might be deemed puerile. An unfeeling & unreflecting man, might exclaim, what is the occasion for visiting an old, shrivelled, & leathern coated, mummy! . . . Such a mind, does not perceive that the secret of the Interest we feel in the subject is the fund of moral reflections,

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12 Watson, “Graeme Park,” Am 301, 5, 3-4.
13 Duyckinck Collection, New York Public Library.
14 “M. D. Logan presents with her respects to J. F. Watson the old clock-case he saw when last at Stenton, as a relic of by-gone time.” M. D. Logan to Watson, May 14, 1839, Am 3011, 5.
15 Dorr, Memoir, 31-32.
& associations of ideas, to which the contemplation of the body leads us: And the less we really can know of its history, the deeper & more intense, is the interest we feel.16

In the various editions of the Annals, Watson lists “Relics and Remembrancers” in his own and others’ collections. Mr. Chew gave him “three of the last” remaining balls and bullets gathered in the Cliveden garret, relics of the Battle of Germantown.17 In 1825, Watson obtained from John Thomson the “first” Argand lamp in the United States, sent from Paris to Charles Thomson by Thomas Jefferson in 1785.18

Above all, he prized “an old cane chair” begged from Deborah Logan in 1824. At his request, Deborah had found the chair in “a sad mutilated state,” missing an arm and a seat, in the Stenton garret. Although she willingly gave it to Watson, she wondered how to effect the transfer of possession. If I send it up to his House his wife will be indignant at receiving such a “Piece of Old Trumpery,” for she refused to give house room to an antiquated tea table which he had bought at vendue. Well, I believe to do the thing handsomely I must get Billy Reger to do repair before I send it.19

Watson unveiled the chair at the Penn Society dinner of 1824. In a list of toasts compiled for use at the antiquarian gathering he included one celebrating “The Sitting Chair of Penn & Logan. A rude relic of our rugged sires, but fruitful of soothing recollections! This regard which we pay to the reliques of men great & illustrious serves as an encouragement to expect the same renown, if sought by the same virtues.”20 The chair’s fame pleased Deborah Logan. She noted “my old chair, with a new arm and Bottom, furbished and varnished and dignified with a silver Plate, was placed for the President to sit in, and two other ones were introduced made of the wood of the old Kensington Elm, & many old relics were sent for and used by the Company; who intend an annual Commemoration.”21 Ulti-

17 Watson, “Historical Incidents in Germantown,” Dreer Collection, CLXXXIV, 82.
18 John Thomson to Watson, Mar. 7, 1825, Am 30163, 80; Watson to John Thomson Mar. 12, 1825, Gratz Collection; John Thomson to Watson, Mar. 25, 1825, Am 30163, 82.
19 DNL Diaries, Sept. 18, 1824, VII, 109–110.
20 Watson to Vaux, Nov. 1, 1824, Vaux Papers.
21 DNL Diaries, Nov. 18, 1824, VII, 145.
mately, Watson’s son, John Howell, presented the chair, now in the collection of Independence National Historical Park, to the City of Philadelphia in 1874 with the tradition that it had been brought from England in 1699 by William Penn, and later owned by James Logan.

Watson’s interest in relic furniture extended to designing articles to be manufactured from historically significant woods. In 1824, he obtained a piece of mahogany from a beam in the putative house of Christopher Columbus in Santo Domingo. Portions of this appeared as inlay in the snuff boxes which Watson commissioned for members of the Penn Society. Each was to be constructed from primitive woods, with four kinds inlaid on the top lid.22 Lafayette, John Thomson, DuPonceau, and Vaux were among the original recipients of the boxes. Woods used in Vaux’s included black walnut, elm from the Treaty Tree, sweet gum, Columbus mahogany, and oak from “the top log of the butment wharf of the first bridge laid over Dock Creek.”23 Watson felt the boxes presented to a sympathetic and contemplative mind “remains calculated to impress the imagination with many grateful recollections of our primitive history.”24

In 1830, he expressed an inclination to construct a “neat & ornamental small chest of Relic wood to contain the earliest papers of the Penn Society.” The beam of Guest’s Blue Anchor tavern, where Penn landed, formed the primary wood. For contrast and ornament, Watson decided to add inlays of the Treaty Tree and the walnut which had grown before Independence Hall. Inside the lid, he planned to place a water color of Penn’s landing, fronted with glass for protection, after the manner of the Annals. A similar treasure chest, with a water color of the Treaty Tree signed by Watson under glass inside the lid, is now in the Winterthur Collection, filled with small relics bearing labels in Watson’s hand.25

Perhaps the most interesting of Watson’s surviving relic collages is the “Liberty and Equality” chair now in the collection of Independence National Historical Park. On a trip to Harrisburg in 1835,

23 Watson to Vaux, July 20, 1825, Vaux Papers.
24 Watson to John Thomson, July 20, 1825, Gratz Collection.
25 Watson to Vaux, Dec. 1, 1830, Society Collection.
Watson saw the “Rising Sun” chair in which he thought John Hancock sat to declare national independence. He described it as “a high back mahogany one with a stuffed leather seat,” and included a pen-and-ink sketch of it in his journal. From this design William Snyder of Kensington, using relic woods, constructed a “singularly historical chair.” Incorporated were mahogany from the Columbus house, oak from a house in Letitia Court, cane seating from the Penn armchair in Watson’s possession, hair from the head of Chief Justice John Marshall secured by undertaker William H. Moore, a fragment of the frigate Constitution, and a portion of the great ship Pennsylvania launched in 1837. Walnut from the last of a group of trees standing in front of Independence Hall formed the framing of the chair, which was acquired by the Commissioners of Kensington in 1838. With the incorporation of Kensington into the City of Philadelphia, an act of the Select and Common Councils transferred the chair to city ownership, and placed it in Independence Hall.

In addition to collecting relic wood fragments, Watson attempted to preserve Philadelphia trees associated with historic events. Vaux and Smith assisted his endeavors. Although too late to save the Penn Treaty Tree, which fell in 1810, Watson offered to pay for painting a tin marker to read “The Treaty Tree/Emblem/Of unbroken Faith/Cherish this Scion/from the Parent Stock!” to be placed at the site, in hopes that it might incite respect for an offshoot of the original elm in the neighborhood. Smith secured the shoot from a second scion on the Pennsylvania Hospital grounds. Feeling that no monument could surpass the perpetuity of the tree itself on the same ground, Watson aided in boxing the tree, which then died. In 1826, he asked Vaux to intervene for the preservation

28 [Watson, 1827?], LCM, Yi 2 7299, F 95; Watson to Vaux, Mar. 3, 1827, Society Collection; Annals (1857), I, 138.
of the “Last Tree of the Forrest Race now extant, within the bounds of the city.” He felt the tree would pay for its ground room by its celebrity as a curiosity. At the same time, he expressed an interest in the fate of six sweet gum trees on the north side of Vine Street, and hoped they would long be preserved to show “the strange progress of our City from the Sylvan state.”

A final facet of Watson’s activity was his promotion of “respect for the memory of all good men who had been useful in their generation.” In 1826, he erected a small marble slab above the joint graves of General James Agnew and Colonel William Byrd, victims of the Battle of Germantown, in the Lower Burying Ground, 4901 Germantown Avenue. To promote Laurel Hill, Smith persuaded John Thomson, nephew of Charles Thomson, to exhume his uncle’s remains from the family plot near Harriton, and transfer them to the new rural cemetery in 1838. Watson called the move an honor to Laurel Hill and a duty to Thomson. The grave marker, a granite obelisk sixteen feet tall, was to bear an inscription of Watson’s composition, but the granite rejected the chisel. A single marble slab, now indecipherable, carried Watson’s verses instead. After Deborah Logan saw a copy of the tribute, she expressed delight “that it seemed to me ... to be as unexceptionable as it did.”

In 1838, Watson removed the body of Thomas Godfrey, “inventor” of the mariner’s quadrant, to Laurel Hill. Subsequently, the directors of the Mercantile Library of Philadelphia appointed a committee to collect funds to erect an appropriate monument over Godfrey’s tomb. They asked Watson to serve, in recognition of the interest which he had previously manifested in having due honor paid Godfrey’s memory, and a memorial was raised.

In 1842, Watson requested Smith’s permission to exhume the remains of General Francis Nash of North Carolina and three other American officers from the Mennonite Burying Ground at Kulpsville, Montgomery County, and to reinter them under one monument in Laurel Hill. He expected a cavalry escort to effect the transfer. Smith refused space. Undaunted, Watson raised ninety-

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29 Watson to Vaux, July 3, 1826, Vaux Papers.
30 DNL Diaries, Aug. 28, 1838, XVI, 349; Dorr, Memoir, 38.
31 Clipping “From Silliman’s Journal for January 1839,” Dreer Collection, CLXXXVI, 357; Isaac Barton to Watson, May 18, 1840, ibid., 313.
two one-dollar pledges from the citizens of Germantown and Norristown for an appropriate marker, which was erected in 1844. Watson conceived the past in visual terms. Association interest increased the scope of his vision. For example, a visit to Valley Forge in 1828 revived “all the necessary association of ideas” he had regarding the severities endured there by the suffering American Army. Artifacts, relics, and wood fragments acted as a springboard for him. They allowed him to dive into vanished eras, and surface with a refreshed mental image of the world of the “founders.” For these reasons, in addition to collecting materials for his Annals, he promoted historic preservation.

In his eighty-second year, Watson contracted a kidney inflammation and died at his home on December 23, 1860. His funeral and interment took place three days later at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Germantown. Thus, John Fanning Watson became part of his beloved “olden time.”

VII

In preparing the Annals, the Tales, and various miscellaneous historical writings, Watson had three major aims. Primary was his hope of compiling anecdotes for a local mythology to be written by authors of the caliber of Cooper or Irving. Inspiring a school of local historians and antiquarians to continue research and collecting was his second goal. Preservation of the physical past from destruction was his third desire. The measure of Watson’s success can be taken by evaluating the degree to which his ambitions were realized.

Watson considered James McHenry’s The Tale of Meredith or the Mystery of the Meschianza (1831), and A Tale of Blackbeard, the Pirate (1835), as literary fruits resulting from the publication of the Annals. To these can be added several books by George Lippard, including Blanche of Brandywine; or September the eighth to eleventh, 1777 (1846), Washington and his generals, or Legends of the Revolu-

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33 Watson, “Trip to Valley Forge,” Am 2705, 1; “Trip to Valley Forge & Camp Hills, July, 1828,” Am 3712, 10.
1 Watson to Smith, no date, LCM, Yi 2 7299, F 181.
tion (1847), and The Rose of Wisahikon; or the Fourth of July, 1776 (1847).

McHenry prefaced his tale with a note about the source of his material, a manuscript relating a series of adventures connected with the occupation of Philadelphia by the British Army. “It contained a mass of information concerning the olden time in and about Philadelphia, which would have been a treasure to my worthy friend Mr. Watson, when compiling that most instructive and curious of all American books, (not excepting even Knickerbocker’s renowned history,) the Annals of Philadelphia. What I supposed would be a treasure to Mr. Watson, I naturally looked upon as valuable to myself.” The unidentified author of Blackbeard dedicated his work to Watson, and claimed that his intention was to execute an historical sketch, not a fanciful romance, from the primitive records of Philadelphia.

Lippard, perhaps better known for his muck-raking novels, dedicated The Battle-Day of Germantown (Philadelphia, 1843) to Watson. The story ran as a serial in the Citizen-Soldier beginning on October 18, 1843. Lippard acknowledged Watson’s assistance in providing various traditions and incidents from the second edition of the Annals for his account. The engravings accompanying his chronicle were taken from the plates illustrating the forthcoming Annals edition.

Two poetic effusions by Mrs. Lydia Sigourney, the “Sweet Singer of Hartford,” owe their origin to her perusal of Watson’s Historical Tales of Olden Time New York. “First Gift to the Indians at Albany,” included in Poems (1834), was based on Watson’s anecdote about Henry Hudson and drunken Indians at Albany on September 19, 1609. The second, “Sunrise at New York in 1673,” appeared in Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser.

An obituary in the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin on December 23,
1860, acknowledged Watson as “the father of the school of local historians who have done so much in the last half century to rescue from oblivion the early history of Philadelphia.” This group of antiquarians and historians included Watson’s disciple J. Jay Smith, Philadelphia optician John McAllister, and autograph collectors Ferdinand J. Dreer and Simon Gratz. Watson and McAllister shared an ability to “evvoke spirits . . . from the vasty deep of olden time!” Both McAllister and his son contributed facts of “olden times” to Watson’s store. Through McAllister, Watson occasionally corresponded with Benson J. Lossing, author of the Field Book of the Revolution.

Dreer coveted Watson’s manuscripts. In January, 1860, he requested a copy of Watson’s poem “My Mother in Heaven.” While copying his mother’s recollections of her youth in Walpole for Dreer, Watson decided to sell him the entire volume of seven articles for twenty-five dollars. Watson assured Dreer “they are all historical and are nowhere else to be found.” Included in addition to the Walpole recollections was his account of a visit to Chester in 1827, “wholly original, and has not been published & has several pictures.” Watson explained that “the foregoing being the conceptions of my own mind & my feelings in the things told, may be considered as something of myself, outside their intrinsic worth as historical facts. You alone seem to have the power to allure them from my possession.”

After this sale, Watson gave Dreer a lady’s pincushion made of American-grown silk, half a dozen woodcuts from the Annals, and an unidentified item of William Bingham’s furniture. He subsequently offered Dreer his manuscript “Germantonians and Sketches of Our Village,” portions of which were published in the Germantown Telegraph in 1836, and sold him his “Supplement to the Annals of Philadelphia and New York” compiled in 1846. To enhance the manuscript, Watson provided captions for twenty views of houses and places in Germantown taken in 1859. Both Dreer and McAllister

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6 Watson to McAllister, June 12, 1847, Gratz Collection; Watson to McAllister, May 12, 1859, LCM, Yi 2 7380, F 67.
7 Watson to Dreer, Feb. 16, 1860, Dreer Collection.
8 Watson to Dreer, Mar. 5, 1860, ibid.
ultimately gave their collections to the public, the first to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the second to the Library Company of Philadelphia. 9

Simon Gratz wished to purchase autograph letters from Watson’s hoard, but Watson refused to sell his three bound volumes of letters respecting the Annals, which he preserved as vouchers for statements in those books. For $200, later reduced to $150, he was willing to dispose of a volume containing more than a hundred letters from distinguished persons. “Such as they are, they came to me unsought & unbought,” Watson wrote Gratz. 10 Subsequently, Watson requested that Gratz return the volume, because he “felt a wish to keep the book together, for the remembrance of my old & early friend Delaplaine.” 11

Why did Watson part with portions of his collection? His daughter Lavinia suggested in a letter to Benson J. Lossing that the sales were prompted by the lack of affection and admiration for Watson’s writings and collection of relics among family members. Until Watson’s death, only Lavinia shared his interests. Afterwards, her brother John sat for hours examining his father’s manuscripts and concluded “there never was such a man.” 12

Local historians sought Watson’s advice. In 1860, Howard M. Jenkins, then a youth of eighteen, asked Watson’s opinion and advice on executing a new history of Pennsylvania. Watson replied, “What the Public should know, is very different from what they will read & pay for.” 13 Jenkins later edited a three-volume edition of Pennsylvania Colonial and Federal (1903). The Rector of Christ Church, Philadelphia, the Reverend Benjamin Dorr, acknowledged the Annals as prompting his study, A Historical Account of Christ Church, Philadelphia . . . (1841). A negative response to Watson’s account of the “Fort St. Davids” fishing company caused Charles V.

10 Watson to Gratz, Oct. 20, 22, 1860, Gratz Collection.
11 Watson to Gratz, Nov. 8, 1860, ibid.
12 Lavinia Fanning Whitman to Benson J. Lossing, Feb. 14 [1861], Benson J. Lossing Papers, HSP.
Hagner to correct the erroneous story in his *Early History of the Falls of the Schuylkill...* (1869), pages 21–30.  

With his efforts at historic preservation, Watson was less successful. While a marker in Penn Treaty Park still shows where the Shackamaxon Elm flourished, the Slate Roof House was demolished. The Letitia House sits, shutters closed, alone in West Fairmount Park between Girard Avenue and the Schuylkill Expressway, the temperance inn of Watson’s vision gone.

Watson’s merit as an historian and antiquary was recognized by his contemporaries. Giles F. Yates, editor of the *Schenectady Democrat* and author of that paper’s “Antiquary” column, wrote concerning antiquaries in 1835: “Of such congenial spirits we know but one in the United States, Friend John F. Watson, of Pennsylvania, we greet thee!” When the Historical Society of Pennsylvania celebrated the 169th anniversary of the landing of Penn at Chester, Watson shared honored guest status with such notables as Henry Rowe Schoolcraft of Washington, D.C., and Benjamin Ferris of Wilmington. “For unearthing old legends & old bones,” Dickinson College made Watson an honorary member of their Philosophical Society. The Massachusetts Historical Society meeting of June, 1861, heard a memorial which cited the *Annals* as evidence of Watson’s great historical and antiquarian research and taste. Benson J. Lossing prepared a brief biography to be presented before the New-York Historical Society. The entry for Watson in *Harper’s Encyclopedia of United States History... Based Upon the Plan of Benson John Lossing LL.D.* (1902) cites him as “an industrious delver in antiquarian lore.” Most extensive of the memorials and memoirs was that given by the Reverend Dorr before the Historical

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14 Benjamin Dorr to Watson, Apr. 2, 1838, in Am 3011, 2.
15 John Crump to R. Eddy, Aug. 10, 1867, Society Misc. Collection, Box 7B, HSP.
16 Undated clipping, Dreer Collection, CLXXXVI, 252.
18 Watson to Smith, Dec. 17, 1838, in LCM, Yi 2 7299, F 225.
Society of Pennsylvania, published later by Watson's family. Dorr believed that Watson would be regarded as the founder of the Historical Society by succeeding generations.²¹

Watson's interest and enthusiasm continue to benefit modern scholars. Despite his errors of fact and, occasionally, of judgment, his works remain a primary source for study of the colonial period in both Philadelphia and New York. For this reason, his reputation as an antiquarian should be joined with that of "historian."

*Henry Francis du Pont*  
*Winterthur Museum*  