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*Address for the 150th Anniversary of
The Historical Society of Pennsylvania*

IN THE spring of 1973 I came to Philadelphia to tell the members of the Philobiblon Club something of the history of the Club of Odd Volumes in Boston. On that occasion, I began by observing that

When Bostonians and Philadelphians visit back and forth they always feel at home because of the similarity of institutions in two cities that were both principal ports of British North America. Sometimes one, sometimes the other had a good idea first. It was acquaintance with the American Philosophical Society, acquired while serving in Philadelphia as a delegate to the Continental Congress, that inspired John Adams to found the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Boston in 1780. Although with learned societies embracing all fields of knowledge Philadelphia was first and Boston second, the roles were reversed in regard to American history. The Massachusetts Historical Society, organized in 1790, was the first institution of its kind in the country, while the Historical Society of Pennsylvania was the seventh, having been incorporated in 1826.¹

The anniversary that we celebrate tonight was a meeting on 2 December, 1824, held at the house of Thomas I. Wharton, at which it was agreed that "it was expedient to form a Society for

¹ Walter Muir Whitehill, *The Club of Odd Volumes, Boston, 1887-1973* (Philadelphia, 1973), 3.

the purpose of elucidating the history of Pennsylvania." Although a comparable date in Boston was 26 August, 1790, when the Reverend Jeremy Belknap summoned four friends to discuss the method of establishing a convenient centre where historical books and documents would be available to those who needed them, the Massachusetts Historical Society has chosen to regard as its birthday 24 January, 1791, the date of its first formal meeting.²

Dr. Belknap, the founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society, expressed a principle of general application and of the highest importance when he wrote to his Philadelphia friend Ebenezer Hazard: "We intend to be an *active*, not a *passive*, literary body; not to be waiting, like a bed of oysters, for the tide (of communication) to flow in upon us, but to *seek* and *find*, to *preserve* and *communicate* literary intelligence, especially in the historical way." Again in 1795, in anticipation of scrounging documents from John Hancock and Samuel Adams, Belknap wrote to Hazard: "There is nothing like having a *good repository*, and keeping a *good lookout*, not waiting at home for things to fall into the lap, but prowling about like a wolf for the prey."

These sentences have often been repeated, but with reason, for they are the rock upon which many great collections of sources of American history have been founded. In justification for repeating them once again, I quote from E. B. White's *The Elements of Style*³ where in 1959, in support of the principle "Do not take shortcuts at the cost of clarity," he wrote:

Do not use initials for the names of organizations or movements unless you are certain the initials will be readily understood. Write things out. Not everyone knows that N.A.A.C.P. means National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and even if everyone did, there are babies born every minute who will some day encounter the name for the first time. They deserve to see the words, not merely the initials.

Parenthetically I might note that, in deference to changing tastes, Mr. White, in his second edition of 1972, chose another set of

² See Walter Muir Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies* (Boston, 1962), chapters I and V, for material relating to the Massachusetts Historical Society and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

³ (New York, 1959), 67.

initials. His example now runs: "Not everyone knows that SALT means Strategic Arms Limitation Talks."⁴

As for the need of reminding babies born every minute of the significance of things that they might otherwise take for granted, I quote a remark by the astronaut, Captain James A. Lovell, United States Navy (retired), in a commencement address last May at Washington and Jefferson College: "My mother could hardly believe that I circled the moon in 1968, but my 8 year old son doesn't think it's any big deal because, after all, we have been doing it as long as he can remember."⁵

The New York merchant John Pintard, a friend and correspondent of Jeremy Belknap, founded the New-York Historical Society in 1804. Less than three months after its organization, Pintard issued an address "To the Public," indicating the types of material desired for its library, and furnishing in this succinct phrase the timeless apologia for such collecting: "for without the aid of original records and authentic documents, history will be nothing more than a well-combined series of ingenious conjectures and amusing fables." The American Antiquarian Society, established at Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1812 by the scholar-printer Isaiah Thomas, similarly undertook the collection of printed and manuscript sources for its library.

By the outbreak of the Civil War, an historical society had been founded in every state east of Texas, with the single exception of Delaware; United States Army officers had even organized one on the day after Christmas in 1859 in the Territory of New Mexico. Such organizations were founded in Maine and Rhode Island in 1822, and in New Hampshire in 1823. The following year, 1824, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania was created. That Philadelphia was seventh in the chronological list was, I suspect, due to a feeling that the American Philosophical Society's capacious garment would warm history as well as other disciplines. At least Ebenezer Hazard had such a thought when he wrote Jeremy Belknap on 14 January, 1791, from Philadelphia: "You ask me if an Antiquarian Society cannot be established here. Perhaps it might, and perhaps the thing

⁴ (New York, 1972), 73.

⁵ *The 175th Commencement, Washington & Jefferson College, May 25, 1974* (Washington, Pa., 1974), 8.

might be considered as falling within the Philosophical Society's department." There was no immediate response, although on 17 March, 1815, the American Philosophical Society, which had previously worked chiefly in the physical and mathematical sciences, added to its six existing committees a seventh, concerned with "History, Moral Sciences, and General Literature."

Peter S. Du Ponceau, a brilliant Frenchman who had come to America in 1777 as Baron Steuben's aide and had naturalized himself in Philadelphia as a lawyer, produced for this committee a plan of operations. His basic motives were summarized in the following rhetorical question: "How can the Historian himself perform his task with honor and credit if the materials for his work are not collected and preserved for him, before all-devouring time has blotted from the memory of men those interesting details, which alone can give the key to the true causes of public events?" Although Du Ponceau for several years carried on an extensive correspondence in search of historical sources, the committee had ceased to function by 1820. Four years later, however, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania came into being as an independent organization. For a century and a half it has been seeking, preserving, and communicating historical sources in a manner that has made it one of the outstanding organizations of its kind in the United States.

The possessions of such a society resemble an iceberg. However impressive the visible portion may be, there is always an immensely greater bulk that does not meet the eye. By various forms of publication, however, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania has attacked the problem of making its resources available and useful. The outstanding example is *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, which has now completed ninety-eight years of publication. This distinguished historical quarterly, the first of its kind in the United States, was the inspired creation of Frederick D. Stone, Librarian of the Society from 1877 to 1897. It established a pattern that in later years was widely emulated by other historical societies. Recently, some of its emulators have fallen by the way, and allowed their periodicals to lapse into nostalgic, heavily illustrated chit-chat, but the *Pennsylvania Magazine* has continued to be an essentially scholarly publication.

On this anniversary, it is well-worth reiterating a paragraph from

the *Statement of Policy by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, published in the April, 1940, issue of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, which is one of the results of the presence here from 1935 to 1940 as Librarian and Editor of Julian P. Boyd. This eleven-page "declaration of faith and purpose" is founded upon the following assumptions:

It implies a belief in the value and dignity of the incomparable story of America, a delight in its variant voices from all lands blending into a common voice of hope and promise. It means a deep concern for the life of the people as well as a desire to record the actions of their leaders. It means that here in Pennsylvania—from the beginning the most cosmopolitan and democratic of all States—history concerns itself with the Finns and Swedes, the Dutch and English, the Scots-Irish and Germans, the Negroes and Slavs, without regard to their status, their beliefs, their color, their accents. It means a broad and intelligent interest in the fundamental unit in society, the family, and not a mere concern for the compilation of genealogical tables. In the explicit statement concerning new instruments for reproducing and collecting historical records, it means a desire for the increased usefulness of its collections and for the abandonment of the warehouse theory of custodianship; it substitutes therefor a trusteeship, to be justified only in terms of increased accessibility and increased usefulness.

On the 125th anniversary of the Society in 1949 there was published a second edition of a *Guide to the Historical Manuscripts in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, which leads the way through some four million items that are to be found in 1,609 collections. The number is today far greater, but that figure for 125 years of collecting, starting from scratch, is an impressive one. In anticipation of the 150th anniversary, Nicholas B. Wainwright published last spring a revised edition of *Paintings and Miniatures at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania*. An 1872 catalogue listed 81 items of this sort; a 1942 edition 615. The 1974 catalogue describes 791 portraits and miniatures by 201 identifiable artists.

In another illustrated publication that has just appeared, *One Hundred and Fifty Years of Collecting by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1824-1974*, Mr. Wainwright provides a general view, as from the air, of the products of this activity. It is clear from this that, having produced a good repository, the Society has followed Jeremy Belknap's principle of "not waiting at home for

things to fall into the lap, but prowling about like a wolf for the prey."

Consider, first of all, the material concerning the Penns. In 1833 the Society received the portrait of William Penn, the Founder, as a gift from his grandson, Granville Penn of Stoke Park, Buckinghamshire. Other paintings followed from that source, and in 1857⁴ Granville John Penn presented the celebrated wampum belt given to his great-grandfather, William Penn, by Indians at the peace meeting held in the shade of the Kensington elm at Shackamaxon. These were welcome gifts, made by descendants, because the Society offered an appreciative and secure repository. But when the last of William Penn's male heirs died in 1869, and an immense number of family manuscripts came on the market in London, the Society hastily raised money by subscription to secure most of the Penn archives. So some twenty thousand documents were purchased in the seventies. With other accessions, large and small, acquired from many sources, the Society's Penn collection now numbers more than thirty thousand items.

Mr. Wainwright first surveys the Penn, Franklin, and Washington collections, which contain some of the most spectacular possessions of the Society. He then deals with munificent collectors, who gave, bequeathed, or made possible the acquisition of their libraries and manuscripts. George W. Fahnstock, George Brinley of Hartford, Charlemagne Tower, and Frederick R. Kirkland greatly enriched the printed resources of the Society, while David McN. K. Stauffer, collector and student of American engravings, extra-illustrated many books by the insertion of prints and documents pertinent to their contents.

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania also benefited greatly by the manuscript collecting of such nineteenth-century Philadelphians as George M. Conarroe, Ferdinand J. Dreer, Frank M. Etting and Simon Gratz, who assembled significant and vast groups of American and European autograph letters. These early autograph collectors, as Mr. Wainwright points out, "collected in series, filling them in much as a stamp collector strives to obtain every stamp in a set." Signers of the Declaration, Presidents of the United States, members of the Albany Convention, the Stamp Act and Continental Congresses, were eagerly sought. Simon Gratz's set of the Signers of the

Declaration is stated to be "the most perfect for its depth," for of its 56 components, 53 were full autograph letters, 33 of them dated in 1776. These great collections contain everything under the sun. Sometimes the documents are of very high historical significance, but out of context all of them exist in a vacuum.

While we must be grateful for documents that have survived, and have come to the Society through the activities of these collectors, autograph collecting in series was a disservice to history, for it encouraged the breaking up and scattering of groups of papers that would have been more useful had their integrity been preserved. Many possessors of inherited bodies of family papers did not always realize this in the nineteenth century. Although the principal mass of the Winthrop papers eventually reached a safe haven in the Massachusetts Historical Society, some members of the family in the past century thought it no impropriety to give a letter with an important signature to a distinguished visitor for a memento. By such means the papers of great men were often dismembered, as if they were the skeletons of saints, whose virtue was transmitted through a shin-bone here, a left finger there, and a head somewhere else. In recent years the editors of the Washington, Franklin, Adams, Jefferson papers, and similar projects, have had to spend an inordinate amount of time tracking down documents that have been dispersed through the enthusiasm of collectors of autographs in series.

The historian is always especially grateful to those families that have kept large bodies of papers together and given them to libraries like this one. Indeed the greatest usefulness of the older historical societies has been to encourage and inspire such preservation. In his chapter on the colonial period, Mr. Wainwright notes that the foundation of its colonial manuscripts is

to be found in its archives of the Bartram, Bradford, Cadwalader, Clifford, Drinker, Gilpin, Hollingsworth, Hopkinson, Logan, Meredith, Norris, Pemberton, Peters, Powel, Rawle, Shippen, Wharton, Wistar, and Willing families.

Most of these family collections are large, some cover many generations. The Cadwalader papers cover a time span of 1680 to 1900 and number some 65,000 documents. Larger yet are the Hollingsworth manuscripts, which, spanning a period from 1748 to 1887, amount to 165,000 papers

dealing with the political and economic interests of a flour manufacturing family.

The papers of James Logan and of Isaac Norris I and II are extremely rich. Their letter books, which are virtually complete, are the authority for much that has been written about the early decades of Philadelphia's eighteenth-century history.

Similarly, great collections of family papers are of equal importance in the Society's nineteenth- and twentieth-century material. Indeed, the attraction and preservation of such bodies of manuscripts is the greatest single contribution that a society of this type can make to American history.

The beauty of such collections, from the historian's point of view, is that they contain not only documents of obvious importance, but others that, though they seem trivial at first sight, preserve some nugget of fact that will provide the missing piece in a puzzle. If they have been left in their original bundles, tied with a bit of red tape, there is all the more chance that the associative value of a seemingly insignificant piece of paper may become apparent.

Thirty-five years ago at the Peabody Museum of Salem, I by myself went through a number of sea chests full of shipping papers, untying the bundles, opening the papers, and transferring the contents of each bundle to a separate folder that would eventually be placed in a manuscript box. Mercifully, these chests had long been undisturbed. When I found a scrap of paper in a bundle, I knew that it was there because it had *some* connection with a given Salem voyage to Canton or Zanzibar, for the shipmaster had, like an orderly seaman, put in one place his instructions, invoices, bills, prices current, and everything to do with the voyage, and nobody had touched the papers since. So these bundles, although transferred to acid-free folders in manuscript boxes, could still tell their story to a maritime historian.

Not all collections of papers remain in pristine condition. Often their order is disturbed by a private owner looking for old postage stamps, or trying to be sure that the papers contain no reference to some long-forgotten peccadillo or scandal. The desire to read over papers before sending them to an historical society is much to be deplored, for such perusal usually upsets the original order. Moreover, the reader sometimes throws away whatever he or she

finds uninteresting. When such rejects are tossed in the fireplace, the reader often finds too late a document that requires, for its full understanding, something that has already been burned. Even if the "uninteresting" is simply set aside, rather than destroyed, an unholy hash has been made of the collection, for the original order has been disturbed.

Many many times friends who were housecleaning have told me that they were about to throw out masses of grandfather's this or that, which could be of no possible interest to anyone. Repeatedly, I have urged them to send for Stephen T. Riley, Director of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and let *him* decide. I suspect that the same kind of thing goes on in Philadelphia. I therefore seize this opportunity to preach a sermon on the text of Matthew xxi.42: "Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner?"

With historical manuscripts, nothing is too old or too recent, too slight or too bulky, too dull or too frivolous, to be of potential use somewhere, if it gets into the right repository. If any of you find an unexpected bundle of papers in a desk drawer, or a trunk of them in the attic, do not try to read them. If they are falling apart, do not apply first aid with scotch tape or other homemade remedies. Do not waste time trying to discover whether your grandson or second cousin might be interested in them. Notify the Historical Society of Pennsylvania at once, and let it decide whether they are worth preserving, and if so where. A dull-looking early nineteenth-century account book may be of remarkable interest if it was kept by an architect or a cabinet maker. So many papers still appear every year at the Massachusetts Historical Society that I am confident that the Historical Society of Pennsylvania still has many pleasant surprises ahead, in spite of 150 years of active collecting. The donor of manuscripts is rewarded not only by a sense of conscious virtue, but by a clean attic, and, very possibly, an income tax deduction.

It is from such gifts that the great majority of future acquisitions must come, for few ancient institutions have funds that permit their librarians to cut a dashing figure in auction rooms, or dealers' shops, at today's inflated prices. Within rememberable time, two cents would buy a newspaper or send a letter across the continent;

today these pennies will only pay part of a sales tax on the most modest purchase. But an institution like this one often has cause to rejoice at the books and manuscripts that are already in its possession, and to bless the prescience of earlier generations. When I read a book catalogue during my 26 years at the Boston Athenaeum and discovered that something now valued at many thousands of dollars had been bought for 3 pounds 10 shillings through Obadiah Rich in London in the eighteen thirties, I enjoyed a temporary illusion of solvent well-being. Even if such an item were not owned by the Athenaeum, I felt no desire to pursue it if another copy were owned by an institution in the vicinity. Having begun life as an historian rather than as a librarian, I never developed collector's itch. As long as a book was within reach, and freely accessible to scholars, I never greatly cared who owned it.

Institutions that have passed the 150 mark do not have to call attention to themselves by newsworthy purchases at inflated prices. They should, rather, husband their resources to care for and publish what they have, and to keep their houses in such order that they will continue to be the recipients of important gifts. What money they have for purchases had better be saved for less spectacular items within their particular field that are not available in other libraries. The needs of learning, rather than pride of possession, should be the basis of action. Oftentimes a xerox copy, or a reel of microfilm, costing only a few dollars, will serve the scholar as well as a rare original that is competitively "worth" many thousands.

Amos Doolittle's four engravings of the battles of Lexington and Concord on 19 April, 1775, are rightly esteemed as contemporary pictorial records of the beginning of the American Revolution. As they are the first efforts of a self-taught artist, stronger on industry than talent, their content is of greater interest than their execution. They are so rare that Charles B. Goodspeed, in his half-century of antiquarian bookselling, only once handled a complete set. This he bought early in this century for a hundred dollars and turned it over to his best customer at a very moderate profit. "It was," he noted in his autobiography, "a great bargain for the buyer, as we resold the set on his account years later for a very handsome sum."⁶

⁶ *Yankee Bookseller* (Boston, 1937), 111-112.

Charles Goodspeed, who died in 1950, would I suspect, have been startled to learn that the last complete set sold for \$82,500 at the May, 1973, Sotheby Parke Bernet auction of prints from the collection of the Honorable J. William Middendorf II, now Secretary of the Navy.

If another complete set appeared on the market, I would hope that none of our sesquicentenaries would make any effort to buy it, for such a purchase would add nothing to the historical sources of the American Revolution that they might offer their readers. Seven complete sets are known to be in existence, while other institutions have one or more of the prints. Moreover, they have been admirably reproduced in facsimile three times in the present century,⁷ most recently by the R. R. Donnelley Company in 1974, in a large edition, with an introduction by me.⁸ This latest edition was widely distributed to customers of the Lakeside Press and to libraries. Thus, if another set of these great rarities changed hands, learning would not benefit, for it would provide no new information about the first military action of the American Revolution. What Doolittle recorded is already widely available in a great many places.

For the last 38 years I have been involved in the administration of institutions which have more than passed their 150th birthdays. So far as possessions go, old age is a distinct advantage, but the more you have, the more you have to care for. We are increasingly aware of the filth and corruption in the air of our cities, which does no good to people, books, or objects. We are almost all aware of the impermanence of a great deal of nineteenth-century paper. Sometimes care exercised to avoid one hazard creates another. In his foreword to the 1974 catalogue of your paintings, Nick Wainwright noted how, over 60 years ago, a number of your paintings were not only cleaned and restored but glazed, with the backs of the canvases

⁷ In 1902 Charles Goodspeed engaged Sidney Lawton Smith to re-engage on copper an edition of 75 copies of the Doolittle prints, which were hand colored. These fine engravings, now a considerable rarity, were reproduced by Ian M. F. Quimby, "The Doolittle Engravings of the Battle of Lexington and Concord," *Winterthur Portfolio*, 4 (Charlottesville, 1968), 82-108, in juxtaposition with the originals. In 1960 the Meriden Gravure Company reproduced for Goodspeed's Book Shop 225 copies of the fine set belonging to the Connecticut Historical Society. The later Goodspeed edition soon went out of print.

⁸ Walter Muir Whitehill, *Amos Doolittle's Engravings of the Battles of Lexington and Concord* (Chicago, 1974). The prints were reproduced from the Middendorf set, bought by the Chicago Historical Society.

hermetically sealed to keep out dust. But he adds: "At a later date, the glass was removed from the front of the paintings and the hermetical sealing from their backs, as the danger of condensation was deemed greater than deterioration from dust."

Seventy-five years ago at the Boston Athenaeum, hundreds of broadsides and manuscript letters were carefully mounted in huge albums, which were then catalogued with references to volume and page numbers. As the paper in the albums was highly acid, it was necessary in the last decade for Captain George Martin Cunha, U. S. Navy (retired), who became our conservator in 1962, to disassemble all these albums, deacidify their contents, and shelve the material in a safer way. Through a decade's association with Captain Cunha, I became increasingly aware of the complexity of the problems of preservation that beset libraries. The seminars that he has conducted, and his two-volume work, *Conservation of Library Materials*,⁹ have done much to disseminate necessary information about the enemies of library materials, about preventive care, repair and restoration. As head of the New England Document Conservation Center in North Andover, Massachusetts, Captain Cunha now provides services to many New England libraries.

Problems of this kind are faced by all libraries, but they are particularly acute with very large collections. Preventive care and the repair of materials that have deteriorated through age are expensive. Unfortunately, the trend of modern philanthropy has not yet become adequately aware of the importance of safe housing and the preservation of priceless collections that could not be duplicated if damaged or destroyed. Foundations normally prefer what they call "innovative programs," which do not involve bricks and mortar, humidity controls, and the safeguarding of the rich accumulations of the past. Fortunately an occasional private individual will appreciate the unglamorous needs of institutions and lend a hand with the necessities of housekeeping. The late Henry Belin du Pont once quietly improved the heating and plumbing of a small college in Maryland, but it is a rare man who will undertake such an essential though unexciting benefaction. I am convinced, however, that St. Peter has a special page on the credit side of his ledger for such people.

⁹ *Conservation of Library Materials, A Manual and Bibliography on the Care, Repair and Restoration of Library Materials* (2nd ed., Metuchen, N. J., 1971-72).

Most old institutions have to rely upon their ability to make the most of what they have, and upon the help of a small number of generous friends who understand the situation. There is no finer example in the United States of two ancient institutions making the most of what they have than was demonstrated by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Library Company of Philadelphia in the nineteen sixties. Fifteen years ago, when Nick Wainwright and Edwin Wolf first told me of their hope that the Library Company might build in Locust Street and share resources with the Historical Society, the plan seemed to me institutional statesmanship of the highest order. I rejoice that it has come about, with loss to neither and gain to both. When old institutions show this kind of imaginative flexibility in solving their problems, there can be no doubt that they have long lives ahead. So I wish the Historical Society of Pennsylvania a happy 150th birthday, with many many more in the future.

North Andover, Mass.

WALTER MUIR WHITEHILL