THREE NOTABLE COLLECTORS
OF AMERICANA

HENRY OLIVER EVANS

SOMEONE has said that we are the sum of all our reading. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we are the distillation of the books we have read, or the residue of our reading. However the thought be expressed, nothing has been more generally recognized than the importance of books. Even in ancient Chaldea the period before there was any literature was conceived of as chaos.

Books have been called the “artillery of thought.” Francis Bacon said that “books will speak plain when counsellors blanch,” and Channing, that books “are the voices of the distant and the dead, and make us heirs of the spiritual life of past ages.” Said Wordsworth:

Books are yours,
Within whose silent chambers treasure lies
Preserved from age to age; more precious far
Than that accumulated store of gold
And orient gems, which, for a day of need,
The Sultan hides deep in ancestral tombs.
These hoards of truth you can unlock at will.

Montaigne—that wisest, most lovable, and most human of the men of the world who hold up the mirror of life to us—when he retired to his tower and his thousand beloved volumes, caused to be painted above the mantel in his study the inscription: “In the year 1571, at the age of thirty-eight, Michel de Montaigne, long weary of the servitude of the Court and of public employments, betook himself to the bosom of the learned Vir-

1 Adapted from an illustrated address given at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on April 28, 1936. Mr. Evans is a practicing attorney in Pittsburgh. Ed.
gins, where, if the fates permit, he may pass, in calm and freedom from all cares, what little shall remain of his allotted time now more than half run out.” Years later this same philosopher said: “Books are the best provisions I have found for this human journey. They relieve me from idleness; rescue me from the company I dislike; are the comfort and solitude of my old age.”

Over collections of books, or libraries, the age-long refrain is the same. At the entrance to the library built by Rameses II was the inscription, “Dispensary of the Soul.” According to Carlyle, “the true university of these days is a collection of books.” Leigh Hunt said that “a great library contains not only books but the assembled souls of all those men held wise”; and Henry Stevens, that “libraries are an index of a nation’s, as well as an individual’s, wealth, taste and character.” When the historian Gibbon cleared his decks for final action on his great work and removed to Lausanne, he sold all his property in England and retained only his library, evidently as his choicest possession.

It is not surprising, then, to find that the assembling of libraries goes back to the earliest times of which there is any record, and that archaeological excavation repeatedly pushes the date of the first library into the more and more distant past.

The Ptolemies, who were among the earliest collectors of “first editions,” had a library of seven hundred thousand volumes, according to the highest of widely differing estimates, and one of Mark Antony’s gifts of infatuation to Cleopatra was a library of two hundred thousand volumes that he had confiscated in one of his campaigns. Parenthetically, it may be observed that Antony had acquired his collection by a method generally favored in ancient times. The Ptolemies, in fact, labeled one department in their library, “Books from the Ships,” or books they had stolen from passengers on ships coming into Alexandria. That a remnant of the practice survives even today is suggested by the recent and presumably half-facetious remark of someone to the effect that the successful builder of a library must be a good buyer, a good beggar, and, occasionally, a good thief! To the same end, on a smaller scale, works the borrower who, in the words of Lord Eldon, is perhaps backward in accounting but practiced in “book-keeping.”
Rome—to return to the ancient world—is said to have had no great libraries until the time of the Republic, and Seneca waxed very sarcastic over the *nouveaux riches* who, he said, acquired books as furniture. In the Middle Ages the monasteries held the great collections; a monastery without books was said to be like a fort without armament. These monastery collections formed the foundation of the famous Italian libraries of today, the Vatican in Rome and the Laurentian in Florence. Ireland also was a leader in libraries, and the establishment of a library for Trinity College in Dublin was the method used by the English for salving ruffled Irish feelings after an English victory at Kinsale. Of the great libraries of other European countries space permits but passing mention of a few—the British Museum, once the largest in the world, with its great collection of American works; the Bibliothèque Nationale, a repository of French national collections; and the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

What, then, of America? Gibbon once hazarded the suggestion that in the year 2255 America would be a wilderness, and if he were looking down upon the United States today he would doubtless be amazed to find, not only that this country is not a wilderness, but that it has more books in libraries than has any other country in the world, with Germany second, and England and France, running neck and neck, poor thirds. And outstanding among the great general libraries of the United States are of course the Library of Congress and the departmental libraries in Washington, the public libraries of New York and Boston, and the libraries of Harvard and Yale universities.

Moreover Americans are noted all over the world for their large private gifts to libraries, and residents of Pittsburgh need not be reminded that Andrew Carnegie, the world’s largest giver for library purposes, was chiefly responsible for this proud distinction—Carnegie, whose father and two other weavers formed the first public library in Dunfermline, Scotland, and who himself received his inspiration from the use of Colonel Anderson’s four-hundred-volume library in old Allegheny and from the example of Enoch Pratt, another great library founder. There is no part of the Anglo-Saxon world in which libraries sprung from Carnegie gifts cannot be found. These gifts ranged from five million dollars for sixty-six branches of the New York Public Library to a one-thousand-
dollar appropriation for some little American village or some tiny town off the coast of Scotland, and lesser amounts for islands in the West Indies. Before Carnegie's death in 1919, he and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, a philanthropic agency established by him in 1911, had spent more than sixty-four million dollars in this work, of which nearly forty-nine million had gone for the erection of college libraries and 1,946 free public libraries in the United States.

Among other large givers in the United States for library purposes may be mentioned John Crerar and Walter L. Newberry of Chicago; James Lenox, Samuel J. Tilden, and the Astors of New York; George Peabody and Enoch Pratt of Baltimore; and James Rush of Philadelphia—whose gifts of money, to say nothing of books, exceeded one and in some cases two million dollars. Moreover, through private gifts or public appropriations, or both, a number of American historical societies have assembled noteworthy collections of Americana. The American Antiquarian Society, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, the New York Historical Society, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and the Minnesota Historical Society, for examples, have built up libraries ranging in strength from about two hundred thousand to six hundred thousand volumes, not including extensive collections of manuscripts. Would that the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania in Pittsburgh, with a start thus far of but five thousand volumes, might one day take its rightful place among the leaders in this field.

Such are some of the broader outlines of the background against which may be shown the emergence of three outstanding private collectors of Americana and something of the significance and value of the libraries that they founded and that bear their names—the John Carter Brown Library at Providence, Rhode Island; the Henry E. Huntington Library at San Marino, California; and the William L. Clements Library at Ann Arbor, Michigan. Not only are these three institutions preeminent in their fields, but in their origins they serve to illustrate one of the satisfying ways in which a man of considerable means and cultivated tastes may make a return to the community from which his prosperity derives.
The first-named library differs from the others in that it was the result of almost two hundred years of collecting by various members of the Brown family, whereas each of the others was assembled through the efforts of a single individual within a period of about twenty-five years. It bears the name of John Carter Brown as that of the one most active in its assembling, although it was begun with books acquired by his grandfather and father, both named Nicholas, and was actually given to the public, together with building and endowment funds totaling $650,000, by his son, John Nicholas Brown.

The first book in the collection was bought by the elder Nicholas Brown in 1740, when he was eleven years old. At that time the Browns were a seafaring family, and one of the earliest acquired items was a copy of the *English Pilot* printed in London in 1745. Later the family left the sea to enter the business of keeping a general store, and Nicholas and his brothers grew up to become the famous "Four Brothers" of eighteenth-century Providence, trading as Nicholas Brown & Company. They came to be the leading merchants of that city, and they and their successors engaged actively and successfully in far-flung enterprises—in the West India trade, the China and East India trade, cotton manufacturing, and the acquisition of lands in the Ohio country and western New York. All were also active in civic enterprises: for example, it was mainly through the efforts of the elder Nicholas and his brothers that Rhode Island College was moved from its first location, at Warren, to Providence, and it was after the second Nicholas, who continued the fostering of the institution begun by the family, that the college was renamed Brown University.

Meanwhile the building up of the family library went steadily forward. The second Nicholas began buying old books in his twenties, and his son, John Carter Brown, bought his first old book in 1809, when he was twelve years of age. The latter continued buying all through his school and college days, and throughout an exceedingly busy life he engaged in the collection of rare and fine books as an avocation of importance equal to if not greater than that of his business. At first merely one of the "gentleman-collectors" common in his times, he early concen-
trated on the systematic collection of everything printed, whether published in this country or abroad, relating to the Americas—North, Central, and South—to the year 1801, and with such success that rare items in this field came to be labeled in auction catalogues “Not in the John Carter Brown Library.” Such a collection, of course, has been invaluable to students and historians, and among the more noted of the latter who have used it were Francis Parkman, Justin Winsor, Moses Coit Tyler, and Charles Francis Adams.

Those were the golden days of Americana collection. There were very few buyers, compared with the present day, and some of the prices now appear almost incredible. It is of record that Brown paid about ten dollars each for three famous books, Champlain’s *Voyages*, Hakluyt’s *Virginia Richly Valued*, and one of John Eliot’s Indian tracts, the prices of which today would be from fifty to two hundred times that much. The principal agent for Brown and other large buyers was the famous Henry Stevens, a Vermont Yankee. Stevens had worked his way through Yale College by buying up Americana in the Connecticut and Massachusetts countrysides and, having then settled in London, was in process of becoming a great bookseller. At first he had to do business by having books set aside and forwarded to American buyers for purchase on approval, but in time he accumulated capital and became an independent dealer—in fact, at times very independent.

Stevens regarded John Carter Brown as his first and principal client and gave him first choice of everything in which he was interested. Thus Brown came into conflict with the other large buyer of those days, James Lenox, whose acquisitions now form a substantial part of the great Americana collection of the New York Public Library. Lenox, who was of Scotch descent and therefore very canny, did not like to be left second choice, and there were some very amusing results. One of many stories told relates to the acquisition of a copy of the so-called “Dutch Vespuccius.” Brown was taking the waters at Saratoga when advance sheets of a catalogue including this rare sixteenth-century book reached him after a fortnight’s delay. The book was listed without a price, but in spite of the fact that he was a very shrewd buyer Brown decided to try for it.
Moreover, although the Atlantic cable was comparatively new then and cabling would cost twenty-six dollars, he decided to cable instead of write, and his enterprise won the book, for his cable arrived two hours ahead of a letter from Lenox.

Brown and his contemporaries had long since passed from the scene when Henry E. Huntington emerged as another of the great library builders. Huntington was born at Oneonta, New York, on February 27, 1850. His father was in the general merchandise business and had as a partner his younger brother, Henry's uncle, Collis P. Huntington, who later became famous as builder of the Central Pacific, Southern Pacific, and Chesapeake & Ohio railroads. Collis, stirred by the news of the gold rush, had gone to California in 1849 and there formed the partnership with Mark Hopkins that was to lead to fame and fortune.

In school Henry was a conscientious and successful pupil, but his dominant interests in the beginning were practical rather than scholarly. He made no effort to secure a college education but started out in life for himself by going to New York City when he was twenty. He had picked out a certain large hardware house there in which to learn the hardware business thoroughly, but when he went directly to this firm, they told him there was no vacancy that would interest him, that only a porter was needed. "I'll take the job," he declared, and enthusiastically went to work. His uncle offered him assistance but he preferred, at first, to be on his own.

Not long afterward, however, he accepted an offer from his uncle to manage a sawmill that was cutting ties in West Virginia for the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, and from that time on his career was definitely concerned with railroads and transportation. It was characteristic of him that he soon acquired a small interest in the tie-mill, and even more characteristic that he borrowed money to augment his savings and became the sole owner. Some years later his uncle appointed him superintendent of construction on, and later manager of, the Kentucky Central Railroad, from the sale of which Henry secured his first considerable amount of capital. When he was forty-two he moved to San Francisco at his uncle's request to share in the management of the Southern Pacific
and to represent the Huntington interests generally on the Pacific Coast. There he came to serve as an active director of as many as sixty corporations at one time. Collis P. Huntington died eight years later. He expressed in his will both personal regard for, and confidence in the ability of, his nephew, and left him a large legacy.

For several years before his uncle's death Huntington had been concerned with the management of electric railways in San Francisco, and had become interested in the possibilities of this means of transportation for building up, not only cities, but the territories surrounding them. After his uncle's death he moved his headquarters to Los Angeles, and by 1910, when he retired from active business, he had developed in and about Los Angeles an urban and interurban system surpassing anything of the kind then known.

Huntington was a born collector, with an instinctive appreciation of fine things. He began buying fine books in his twenties, and by the time he reached the age of fifty, in 1900, his interest in collecting had come to equal his interest in business. Like many other book collectors, he was attracted first to examples of the art of bookmaking, to fine printing, distinctive illustrations, and handsome bindings, and then to illuminated manuscripts and incunabula, gradually restricting his purchases largely to first, early, and rare editions, and to manuscripts.

In collecting he followed the methods used in the development of his electric railway system—large-scale purchasing, consolidation, and elimination. In 1911 he became the sensation of the collectors' world by paying one million dollars for the Elihu D. Church library of English poets and early Americana, and two weeks later, while the newspapers were still commenting editorially on the Church purchase, he created another sensation by paying fifty thousand dollars for a Gutenberg Bible at the Robert Hoe sale. This sale brought together four hundred collectors from all over the world; its forty sessions extended over seven months; and among the fifty-five hundred lots bought by Huntington were sixty books for which he paid more than two hundred thousand dollars. Before the end of the Hoe sale he bought the famous Beverly Chew library of early English poetry, and in 1916, after extensive purchases from the
Henry Huth, Britwell Court, and other libraries, it was reported in the newspapers that in six years he had spent approximately six million dollars in collecting. In 1920 he began to deal extensively with Abraham S. W. Rosenbach of Philadelphia, and from that time on his purchases of Americana became greater and greater; in one year, 1922, he acquired seventeen considerable collections of books and manuscripts, five of which were purchased en bloc. The last purchase before his death in 1927 was that of the Henry N. Stevens collection of pamphlets relating to the struggles among European powers for supremacy in North America in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the meantime he had organized a staff of experts for the purpose of examining and comparing the many items in these numerous purchases and of weeding out duplications, with the result that eventually he sold over five hundred thousand dollars worth of such duplications.

The Huntington Library differs from the other two in the manner of its gathering, and therefore in the final result. The other two were largely the result of personal, one might say piecemeal, selection by the principals, whereas Huntington, while exercising supervision, relied more upon experts and his own staff, so that his collections may well be called "a library of libraries or a collection of collections." One of the consequences of this fact is that the library contains thousands of items that have not yet been examined, collated, and merged in the unified collection gradually taking form. But fully organized or not, it would be difficult to overstate the importance of the Huntington collections. Among other things there are more than one hundred thousand rare books in the library, including some fifty-four hundred incunabula, or books printed before A.D. 1500. Perhaps the best way to indicate their scope is to say that the collections cover the development of civilization in England and America. And one of the great points of importance is that the trustees, through Huntington's generous endowment of the library, have been able to make it a very active and widely useful research institution.

William L. Clements, the third of the library founders under discussion here, was born at Ann Arbor on April 1, 1861, in a house on the campus of the University of Michigan. He graduated from that institu-
tion in 1882, with the degree of Bachelor of Science, and settled in Bay City, Michigan. There in the course of the next forty-two years he developed from a small beginning a large and profitable manufactory, the Industrial Works, served as president of the First National Bank and the Bay County Savings Bank, and was active in all worthy civic movements. From 1910 until his death in 1934, he was a regent of the University of Michigan, and as chairman of the regents' committee on buildings and grounds he had entire charge of the large building operations, running into many millions of dollars, that were carried on at the university in those years.

While a student at the university Clements took courses in American history under the famous teacher and author, Moses Coit Tyler, and there received his initiation into the fascinating field of Americana collection. He began large-scale collection with the purchase, in 1903, of a select thousand-volume library assembled by Aaron J. Cooke, a Bay City merchant and bibliophile. He aimed first at the collection of printed and manuscript sources for the history of the discovery, exploration, and settlement of North America, and then extended the field to include the American Revolution.

Beginning in 1914, the European War threw on the market thousands of rare books, including many of first importance to American history. In quick succession, in England alone, the Rowfant, Bridgewater, Devonshire, and Britwell Court collections went under the hammer of the auctioneer, and Clements as well as Huntington made large purchases. Keen-eyed industrialists, these two saw their chances to do for America what the wealthy princes, merchants, and bankers of the fifteenth century did for Italy when they bought up thousands of the precious Greek manuscripts that had been thrown on the market by the devastating wars of that time and stored them in the libraries of Florence, Rome, and Venice.

Outstanding among Clements' later acquisitions were his purchases of the papers of English and American leaders of the Revolutionary period, beginning with the purchase of some 220 volumes of the political papers of Lord Shelburne, prime minister of Great Britain in the criti-
cal period of the peace negotiations with the American colonies—papers retained by Shelburne in accordance with English custom and passed on to his descendants. Other important acquisitions followed, including the papers of General Thomas Gage and Sir Henry Clinton, commanders of the British armies in North America in the periods 1763–75 and 1778–82, respectively; the papers of Lord George Germain, secretary of state for the colonies throughout the Revolution; the General Nathanael Greene papers; the American papers of Alexander Wedderburn, British attorney-general; and the papers of Baron von Jungkenn, war minister of Hesse-Cassel, including letters and diaries of Hessian officers who fought in the Revolution on the side of the British.

In 1922 Clements not only gave his collection to the University of Michigan but provided a beautiful building in which to house it, upon the sole condition that the university bind itself to furnish funds for the upkeep, administration, and extension of the collection. Since that time not only graduate students but professors and authors have been drawn to the university by the presence of this, in many respects, preeminent collection of source materials. The conditions for effective use of the collection are almost ideal. In the Clements Library itself visiting scholars are given workrooms to which are brought and left while in use the desired books, manuscripts, and newspapers of colonial days, while just across the street they are lodged sumptuously in the Cook Law Quadrangle, the gift of another alumnus of the university. Thus under perfect conditions and at most moderate expense, in a beautiful university town, their authors stimulated and aided by the advice and companionship of like spirits, historical works are born.

Of the thousands of individual items of interest treasured in the Brown, Huntington, and Clements libraries, space permits but passing mention of a few selected for their bearing on successive phases of early American history and described in this discussion for the most part without reference to owner.

Among items of the period of discovery and exploration may be mentioned Columbus' "Book of Privileges," written in Spanish with marginal notes in Columbus' handwriting, which relates to promises of King
Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, for the most part unfulfilled, of rewards for his discovery of the New World; a copy of the "Dutch Vespucius," or the *Cosmographiae Introductio* of Waldseemüller, first published in 1507, through a suggestion in which the New World came to be called America after the explorer Americus Vespucius; and the first published map of an American city, a map of the City of Mexico printed in 1524 from a letter of Cortez.

For the period of early settlement in the United States, take for examples the first book relating to the Plymouth Colony, published in 1622, and known as "Mourt's Relation," after George Morton, the signer of its preface; and Penn's famous *Frame of the Government of the Province of Pennsylvania in America*, published in 1682. For later colonial times appear such items as Pownall's manuscript map showing forts built or proposed along the frontiers of the central and northern American colonies in 1755; the manuscript autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, showing, among other things, Franklin's schedule for an ordinary working day; and products of the famous Franklin press, such as the *M. T. Cicero's Cato Major*, published in 1744.

The approach of the Revolution is heralded and glimpses behind its scenes are afforded by such items as a view of the Boston Massacre in 1770, engraved and printed by Paul Revere; the British commander Preston's report of the massacre to General Gage; letters of General Burgoyne, Lord Howe, and others relating to the British defeat at Saratoga in 1777, showing, among other things, that an Englishman's love of his week-end contributed to, if it did not occasion, that defeat; and a letter of George III, written in 1782, in which that much-hated monarch disclaimed all responsibility for any evils that might arise from the granting of independence to the American colonies, a measure to which he had subscribed from "necessity not conviction."

Hundreds, probably thousands, of items in these distant libraries bear directly on the history of western Pennsylvania. Included is many an original document such as Christopher Gist's map of the route taken by Braddock's army in 1755; two contemporary maps of Fort Duquesne and the surrounding territory, found by the French in Braddock's mili-
tary chest after his defeat; "A List of Officers who were present, and of those kill'd and wounded in the Action on the Banks of Monongahela the 9th day of July 1755," and the alibis of Colonels Dunbar and Gage for the bad behavior of the British regulars on that occasion; a letter from Washington to Loudoun discussing events and conditions that led up to the disaster; and an autograph letter of William Pitt, after whom Pittsburgh was named, written by Pitt as the Earl of Chatham on the eve of the introduction of his famous "Provisional Act for settling the Troubles in America," in which he espoused the American cause.

Let this brief survey, then, together with these few from a great number of possible illustrations, show how three busy men, merchant, financier, and manufacturer, giving of their leisure, of their skill in bargaining, of their experience in consolidation and elimination—and of their money too, although money was the least of their gifts—provided Brown University and the University of Michigan and the colleges and universities of California with these great stores of historical data out of which histories come. Providence and San Marino and Ann Arbor have these famous collections as gifts from sons grateful for the prosperity these communities gave them. Shall not Pittsburgh have the like, at least so far as western Pennsylvania history is concerned?

Pittsburgh, as Bancroft put it, was the "Gateway of the West." One may forget, sometimes, that the migration to America in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the greatest mass movement in all history, and that a great part of it passed through Pittsburgh. Thousands of pack trains toiled over the mountain trails to and through Pittsburgh: twenty thousand people went west through Pittsburgh in 1789 alone. Followed then the Conestoga wagon bringing swarms of settlers with their goods from the eastern coast. The canal boat, too, meandering slowly along the Pennsylvania Canal, with a lift over the mountains on the Portage Railroad, poured its flood of goods and settlers through Pittsburgh, down the Ohio, and fanlike through the West. The banks of the western Pennsylvania rivers, as far up the Monongahela as the Cheat River, were lined with boatyards, in which, with the coming of the steamboat, as many as 145 steamboats were built in one year alone. With
the coming of the railroad Pittsburgh became the center of the iron and steel industry; of the coal and coke industry; of the glass industry; of the oil industry. In Pittsburgh were developed the air brake, electric transportation, and the steel car, which revolutionized modern transportation. In short, Pittsburgh became an important factor in all industries, and the history of the early industrial development of America, and indeed of the world, centers in this city.

For an adequate account of this great development, or of any considerable phase of it, the historian must draw upon countless books, pamphlets, old newspapers, maps, letters, memoirs, journals, and other materials of the sorts just described. Where, if not in Pittsburgh, ought a great collection of such materials relating to its own history be assembled and preserved? Fortunately, beginnings toward that end have been made in recent years, but they are only beginnings. The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania has a small library and a not inconsiderable collection of manuscripts; the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, a noteworthy collection of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and American history materials; and the University of Pittsburgh, an invaluable collection of Americana in its Darlington Memorial Library. Moreover, the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey—established in 1931 for a five-year term by the historical society, the university, and the Buhl Foundation of Pittsburgh—has not only promoted the collection of western Pennsylvania historical material, but has also completed the manuscripts of ten volumes dealing with various periods or phases of the history of the region. Nevertheless much remains to be done before Pittsburgh's holdings, at least, can compare with those of the Brown, Huntington, and Clements libraries, or, what is much more important, be considered commensurate with the importance and richness of its own history.

The person or persons who might make it possible to continue building worthily on these foundations, whether through the historical society, the agency most singly devoted to the purpose, or otherwise, would not only have wonderful pleasure in the doing, but would also leave a priceless heritage for all the generations to come.

Who is to have that great good fortune?