
Announcing
a
Personal Loss to this Society
in the Death
of
Franklin Fisk Holbrook
Editor and Librarian
August 20, 1955

FRANKLIN FISK HOLBROOK 1883-1955

It is with profound sorrow and no small measure of regret that the staff of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania reports the death of their friend and colleague Franklin F. Holbrook, for he had served this institution in varied and important capacities for twenty-four years.

Late in 1954 certain alarming symptoms had led him to seek medical attention and on January 6th of the present year he entered the hospital. He returned to his desk for a few days after treatment but soon went back to the hospital. With great patience and courage he maintained a cheerful hope that he might eventually return to his work, though from the first the outcome was apparent. He died on Saturday morning, August 20th, 1955, and was buried in Mt. Lebanon Cemetery, Pittsburgh.

Mr. Holbrook was the son of a Congregational minister and was born at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, on December 12th, 1883. He graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1913, receiving the degree of Bachelor of Arts with distinction and in 1916 he received his degree of Master of Arts in history. From that time until his death history was the field to which he gave most of his time and effort.

Before coming to Pittsburgh in 1931, he worked in association with the Minnesota Historical Society on the war records of that state and was the author, co-author or general editor of several important histories dealing with Minnesota's war activities in and subsequent to the Spanish-American War. From 1929 to 1931 he was special investigator and compiler of a monumental report on materials for research in the social sciences and the humanities.

He was brought to Pittsburgh by Dr. Solon J. Buck, who was conducting an historical survey of Western Pennsylvania in association with our society and for which our building was headquarters. He served as curator for the survey during four years and from 1935 to its conclusion in 1936 he was its acting director.

It was thus that Mr. Holbrook became associated with our society. With the departure of the personnel of the survey he took over the many and varied activities of this society, sometimes with help, often without. At the time of his death he was serving as librarian and editor of the Western Pennsylvania Magazine.

Mr. Holbrook was a man of slight frame and only those familiar

with the routine work of the society appreciated the amount of work he accomplished. He was always approachable; was gentle in manner and comment and listened, apparently unhurried when he was swamped with urgent work. His voice was seldom raised and by nature he was retiring if not self-effacing. He worked for the society uncomplainingly when its finances were at low ebb and did far more work than his remuneration justified. The evidence of his meticulous care is to be found in our magazines he edited during most of the past twenty-four years. They were accepted as a matter of course, like those of the great publishing houses, but their articles were selected, arranged and edited, when time permitted, between greeting visitors, maintaining membership and acquisition records, finding reference books, cataloguing, accounting, arranging exhibits, answering wrong telephone numbers or typing letters. But occasionally there would come sincere praise from high places to encourage him. Today, bound issues are to be found in many libraries across the continent and in foreign countries. Mr. Holbrook was a mine of information and could answer off-hand many of the curious questions which come to historical societies. He could lay his hand on books helpful to students studying for degrees and would even leave important work to help a genealogical search. He could write a letter of refusal with a light touch and a diplomacy which great corporations might well envy. At times he worked in an atmosphere which lacked understanding and appreciation which left him open to criticism with which he sought to evade contact but if pinned down he could usually meet it with formidable defense.

When the present director assumed his duties two years ago, he was welcomed with cordiality and given wholehearted cooperation which continued until his death. When his judgment or criticism was sought, it was given with frankness and sincerity and he never overlooked an opportunity to offer encouragement, either in public or in private discussion.

Mr. Holbrook's death is a great personal loss to those who knew him best but in a broader sense Pittsburgh may well mourn the loss of a man they know only indirectly.

ROBERT D. CHRISTIE