

HATH NOT A PITTSBURGHER SOCKS?

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AROUND 1810, John Johnston recorded impressions of his home town of Pittsburgh. These writings are a unique resource for documenting early settlers in the region. Much has been made in recent years of Pittsburgh's "livability" and reasonable cost of living, and among Johnston's most candid observations 175 years ago is the belief that the city's "cheapness" would entice others to settle in the area.

While Johnston's manuscript in the Historical Society's Archives generally is upbeat about life in Pittsburgh, he cannot help but point out that the young city's residents did not properly support its artisans. Other sources voice a similar lament. Ordering furniture from the East, comments the *Pittsburgh City Directory* of 1826, is "absurd as well as ungenerous towards our own workmen," for their efforts "are equal to any made in Philadelphia or elsewhere." (77)

At one point in his writing, Johnston eloquently comments on the skill of a Pittsburgh stocking weaver, telling us more than simply the weaver's plight in an unfriendly market. Johnston's comments illuminate important aspects of his personality as well, especially his knowledge of literature.

After listing the sorts of business ventures that did succeed in Pittsburgh, he adds that others "attempted to establish themselves here within the last ten or twelve years, but seemed to have withdrawn from the town for want of encouragement from the citizens. What can a man do with his business unless encouraged by his neighbours (sic)?"

He continues:

Is not a stocking, wove in Pittsburgh, as good as one wove in any other part of the world? Of the same quality? Will not the same material yield the same warmth, if manufactured equally well? Why then pass the door of the Pittsburgh stocking weaver, and go or send three hundred or a thousand miles for a pair of stockings not a whit better than his? Why encourage a manufacturer five hundred or five thousand miles hence, in preference to him who seats himself down at your own door, in full confidence that you will encourage him in his useful calling; and whose numerous children and the happiness and comfort of his family are solely depending on the success of his honest labours? No man, I will venture to say, who pretends to reflect honestly and seriously five minutes out of the twenty four hours, will give the preference to the former.

The form that Johnston chooses not only tells us much about

early Pittsburgh commerce. It also closely parallels Shylock's famous speech from William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt by the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? (III. i. 55)

Where Shylock seeks respect as a Jew, Johnston seeks respect for the work of local artisans. It is possible, in fact, that Johnston specifically chose to mimic Shylock to emphasize the plight of the artisans.

The plight of local craftsmen and local industrial workers is often the subject of impassioned pleas for support, whether the discussion focuses on imported stockings or imported steel. Johnston's manuscript reinforces the notion that a city's best resource is its industrious, hard-working citizens, but that these same citizens would do well to remember the importance of their neighbors' handiwork.

Johnston's comments are interesting and valuable, but as an archivist, I have to wonder how I would prepare subject entries in a card catalogue to accurately reflect the content of Johnston's manuscript. Ideally, at least one entry should treat the collection as a resource for studying early nineteenth century education, because of Johnston's knowledge of Shakespeare. Yet, the staff of the Historical Society's Library and Archives cannot provide a subject entry for every issue raised in a collection, because almost every piece could require many different entries. Historians have no clear course for finding information such as John Johnston's comments besides serendipity. Perseverance must be the quality that drives historians through volume after volume, letter after letter, and page after page to find the perfect piece for their historical puzzle.

We are re-cataloging our entire archival collection at the Historical Society, and automating our book catalog to provide better access to our vast holdings on regional history. Still, we hold the door widest for historians who look beyond the card catalog's limitations. 🌀

Historical Society Executive Director John Herbst lends the Director's Gallery in this issue to the Society's Corey Seeman, Head of Reference and Processing for the Library and Archives Division. The author would like to thank Historical Society staff members Teresa Riesmeyer and Anne Madarasz for their assistance.