

Church Archives in the United States¹

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SOME twelve years ago I began a paper on this same subject with the statement that church archives in the United States had been a long time in receiving any serious consideration. Since that time opinions and attitudes toward church archives have undergone considerable change. The long-time neglect of this type of source material was partially caused by the fact that the leading American historians had devoted themselves primarily to our political and institutional development and, from the turn of the century onward for a generation at least, economic determinists were in the historic saddle. It was R. A. Seligman with his *Economic Interpretation of History* (1902) and Charles A. Beard with his *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* and his *Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy* who set the pattern for a whole generation of young scholars. The Turner "school," perhaps the largest and most active group of American historians of the past fifty years, also tended in the direction of economic determinism.

J. Franklin Jameson in his short but splendid survey of the *American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* noted that most of the writings about the American Revolution had been confined to the military and political aspects:

Every move in the political struggle for independence from Great Britain, every action of the Continental Congress, has been described over and over again. Every battle and every skirmish in the long and dragging war has had its historian or has been the theme of meticulous articles or controversial pamphlets.

He stated that even in the 1930's few had concerned themselves with its social aspects. The editor of the most recent edition of Samuel Seabury's *Letters of a Westchester Farmer* (1930) remarks that historians have overlooked the importance of religious factors leading to the Revolution and states that the battle of creeds and dogmas for New World supremacy is "one of the great-

¹ Read before the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Madison, Wisconsin, October 9, 1950.

est, if not the greatest, of its underlying causes." He further states that

To any historian studying chiefly the religious records of colonial America as many others have studied the political, it would appear that the religious strife between the Church of England and the Dissenters furnished the mountain of combustible material for the great conflagration, while the disputes over stamp, tea and other taxes and regulations acted merely as matches of ignition.

As is here suggested, the lack of appreciation for the importance of the religious factor in the American Revolution in particular and in American history in general is largely a result of the unfamiliarity of the historian with the religious records. These records for the revolutionary period alone constitute a formidable number and are generally less available than those dealing with its economic, political, and military aspects. There is also likely to be less understanding of the significance of thought and feeling in any revolutionary era than of military operations and political maneuvers, but feelings, opinions, and prejudices are facts with which the true historian must reckon.

Another example of the unfortunate by-passing of this type of source in the writing of American history is furnished by the historians of the American frontier. The Turner "school," as has been noted, to a large degree has given no attention to the part played by organized religion in the transit of civilization westward. In the most recent general treatment, that by Ray A. Billington, this phase of frontier history is conspicuous by its complete absence. It was such neglect by historians of the frontier that caused me to begin the collection and publication of frontier religious documents, a project which eventually resulted in four large volumes entitled *Religion on the American Frontier*, a collection of source materials illustrating how organized religion functioned in the early West. This work was carried forward with the cooperation of graduate seminars at the University of Chicago on the assumption that historians of the frontier would use such materials once they were made available, an assumption that has proved to be amply justified.

I

Interest in church archives may be said to have stemmed from the presidential address of J. Franklin Jameson before the American Historical Association in 1907. Entitled *The American Acta Sanctorum*, it was a plea for a wider conception of history which,

it had been noted, was at that time largely confined to its constitutional and political phases. The address opens with numerous illustrations of the profit students of the Middle Ages derived from reading the lives of the Saints. As an American parallel, he points to the fact that our knowledge of the American Indian has been obtained largely from a study of the lives and narratives of such Indian missionaries as John Eliot, the New England apostle to the Indians; the Mayhews, who devoted their lives to the Indians on the Massachusetts island; the Jesuits of the North; and the Franciscans of the South and Southwest. The journals and autobiographies of the itinerant pioneer missionaries to the frontier have furnished us with the best descriptions of backwoods life and conditions: the rude agriculture, the log cabins and clearings, the perpetual fevers, the Indian depredations, the fraternal kindness, and the limitless hospitality which opened the door of every log cabin to the stranger. "Stouthearted, downright, muscular, practical, the circuit rider faced the actual world of the frontier and saw it clearly. If like Peter Cartwright or Henry Smith he leaves behind him a description of what he saw we are so much the gainers."

In this epoch-making address Jameson contends that "of all the means of estimating American character . . . the pursuit of religious history is most complete" and that "he who would understand the American of the past and present times, and to that end would provide himself with data representing all classes, all periods, all regions, may find the history of American religion the closest approach to the continuous record he desires." Religion, he points out, is a far more universal concern than literature or philosophy or art. Those who would draw their conclusions of Americans from our clever literary historians cannot help but gain a defective estimate of American character simply because they do not have access to the minds of the inarticulate.

Millions have felt an interest in religion where thousands have felt an interest in literature or philosophy or art. The great masses of the population have been concerned mainly with the tasks of daily life, but social history must concern itself with more than mere economic matters. No view can be a truthful one that neglects a consideration of the ideals which animated and actuated the toiling millions and the thoughts concerning the universe and man which informed their minds.

Another factor leading to an increased interest in church archives has been the growing interest in an understanding of what we call American culture or civilization — those factors which have to do

with the enlightenment of the spirit and the discipline of the mind. The number of important books which have appeared in the last decade on this theme is significant: Parrington's *Main Currents of American Thought*; Curti's *History of American Thought*; Schneider's *History of American Philosophy*; Miller's *The New England Mind*; Gabriel's *The Course of American Democratic Thought*; and Commager's *The American Mind*; and many others. All of these have had to take into consideration religious contributions, for, after all, religion is the mother of culture, and every great religion has been a main factor in creating a civilization. Our historians are realizing as never before that to understand American civilization they must gain a knowledge of the religious influences which have been present in American life from the beginning and have played a determinative role.

II

A second development which has brought an increased interest in church archives is the fact that since about 1920 the number of doctoral dissertations on American church history topics has been increasing by leaps and bounds in all our major universities. Among the principal users of church archives, therefore, are the research students. Since 1916 at least forty such dissertations have been prepared at the University of Chicago alone. Of these, some thirty were written by my students. *The Anglican Episcopate and the American Colonies* (Harvard, 1902) by Arthur Lyons Cross was one of the first, if not the first, Ph.D. thesis written on an American church history theme. All of the major American universities now fully accept such subjects for theses, whereas a generation ago they were more or less frowned upon. At least a dozen recent doctoral dissertations have drawn heavily upon the archives of the American Home Missionary Society now housed at the Chicago Theological Seminary affiliated with the University of Chicago. Colin B. Goodykoontz's *Home Missions on the American Frontier* (Harvard 1939) is a notable example. The American Home Missionary Society collection contains some 200,000 letters covering every section of the nation from 1825 to 1900. Other examples of the growing use of archival materials are the studies made by graduate students of Professor Klingburg, University of California at Los Angeles, based upon archives of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. The original records are in the SPG House in London, but transcripts of many of them are

now available in the Library of Congress and numerous other libraries.

Another illustration in point is the growing use of church archives by Roman Catholic students, particularly at Catholic University of America and Fordham University. Since the end of World War I, Catholic University has sponsored at least fifty doctoral theses on American Catholic history. Peter Guilday, for many years editor of the *American Catholic Historical Review* and professor of American Catholic history, together with Richard J. Purcell, whose death occurred not long ago, furnished the principal inspiration for this burst of interest in American Catholic history. Two of the best theses are *American Opinion of Roman Catholicism in the Eighteenth Century* (Columbia, 1936), by Sister Mary Augustina (Ray), and *Historiography of the American Catholic Church, 1785-1943* (Catholic University, 1944), by John P. Cad-den.

III

The well-trained historians now occupying history professorships in the better denominational colleges have had both a direct and indirect influence in creating interest in church archives and their use.

A large proportion of the colleges in the United States had a denominational origin and their libraries have, through the years, been depositories for historical materials relating to the church of their origin. Here are often found, tucked away in some unused cubby-hole, files of church periodicals, diaries of ministers, journals of church assemblies, synodical and presbytery minutes, and conference and church records. It is a common complaint of history Ph.D.'s teaching in colleges that they are unable to cultivate the field of their special interest because of the lack of available materials. Many a small college library contains sources of great interest and value, but they are utterly neglected by the history instructor because they are "out of his field." In a certain college in the Middle West a professor of history had long been interested in a phase of European history. Since his graduate days, he had with commendable zeal devoted his time, energy, and what little money he could get together to the cultivation of this field. But the total sum of his productivity amounted to little or nothing. Yet, while he was busily engaged in his chosen field, there was lying on the floor of a store room in the college library old newspapers and manuscripts, many relating to the pioneer period of the church which had founded the college. In another college library, letters and other

manuscripts were deposited in an old trunk which no one had ever taken the trouble to examine.

Fortunately such instances of neglect of valuable materials are less common today than they were twenty years ago. Instructors are not only using such sources in their own research, but also are encouraging their students to undertake research in church history. They have also tended to introduce church history materials in their general history teaching. An example is Professor Fletcher of Oberlin College, whose two volume *History of Oberlin*, based on a mine of unused sources, is a distinguished piece of historical writing.

Until relatively recent years denominational history was almost entirely the work of amateurs who had a one hundred per cent denominational approach. Their product was perhaps no worse, however, than much of the political history of their time. It was devoid of all critical insight and was written to cause denominations to think well of themselves. Now every one of the major American religious bodies has trained historians in its ranks, with the result that there is a growing number of first class denominational histories. Examples are the *History of the American Episcopal Church*, by W. W. Manross (Columbia) and *The Disciples of Christ: A History*, by Garrison and DeGroot (Chicago).

Church archives are to be found in every section of the country — in every city, town, hamlet, and rural area where churches have carried on their work. Practically every church, of whatever denomination, has its records of membership, baptisms, marriages, deaths, and congregational meetings. Besides these purely local archival materials there are the official records of the connectional bodies, such as the presbyteries, synods, associations, conventions, and conferences. There are diocesan records, reports of church benevolent societies, records of religious orders, and journals of general assemblies, general conferences, conventions, and other law making bodies. Many of the churches maintain official presses which carry in their columns communications and reports from the various church agencies. Such in general is the nature of the archives of American churches. Besides these, there are the private papers of ministers — diaries, sermons, and letters — a vast and growing body of materials concerning the more than two hundred independent religious bodies in the United States.

These materials have a much larger significance than simply as sources for denominational history. Indeed, among the existing sources concerning the life of any State or portion of a State, the

records of church activities are fundamental. Their importance stems not only from the fact that churches have carried on religious services in countless communities, but also from the fact that churches have been a steady, helpful influence in support of government and have contributed to the economic, social, and educational well-being of the people.

Where are these source materials to be found and how may they be made available to the student of American social history? A brief glance through any of the inventories of church archives which were compiled under the direction of Historical Records Survey of the Works Progress Administration will at once reveal the wide area over which these materials are scattered. It has been my experience that the only satisfactory way to get at this type of materials is to go after it personally. It is of little avail to send out questionnaires to ministers, church officials, or college libraries. In many places the older records of congregations and church bodies are in the hands of private individuals, such as clerks of sessions or congregations, or the families of former clerks or secretaries. Instances are rare, even in large churches, where fireproof safes are provided for such records. If the scholar comes properly accredited, little difficulty will be found in gaining access to local church records. Indeed, I have found ministers and lay officials willing and often anxious to cooperate.

V

There are a growing number of depositories where serious efforts have been made to gather together church archives for the purpose of serving the cause of history. Such depositories may be conveniently grouped under three main heads — denominational depositories, historical societies, and university libraries.

Most of the larger religious bodies have formed historical societies and not only maintain official depositories but also publish historical magazines. This is true of the Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Catholics. In my opinion, the Presbyterians have the best official depositories for their archives — the Northern Presbyterians in the Witherspoon Building in Chicago, the Southern Presbyterians at Montreat, North Carolina. Both employ trained archivists and give every assistance to research workers.

The Methodists are equally history conscious and have many local conference historical societies, but their national society is loosely formed and so far has done little or nothing to form a na-

tional depository. There are, however, several major depositories in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.

Among the Disciples, the youngest of the major American churches, there is a growing interest in church history as evidenced by the observance of their sesquicentennial a decade ago. In 1940 a National Historical Society was formed which maintains an official depository with a half-time librarian at Culver-Stockton College.

The principal depositories of Congregational materials are to be found in New England, chiefly in and around Boston, and in Chicago at the Chicago Theological Seminary. The Congregational Library in Boston at 14 Beacon Street and, in the same building, the archives of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions are probably the two most important collections. In 1909 the Congregational Library contained more than 57,000 volumes and 54,000 pamphlets bearing on Congregational history and a large collection of manuscript materials, mostly pertaining to New England Congregationalism. The archives of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions contain thousands of letters pertaining to Indian missions, 1818-1883, and copies of letters to missionaries, bound in 224 letter books.

At the Chicago Theological Seminary is to be found the American Home Missionary Society collection covering the years 1825-1895. This material is made up of an estimated 150,000 letters from missionaries. The collection is in 19 steel file cabinets and 191 letter copy books. The letters in the cabinets are arranged geographically and chronologically. As yet there is no catalog of accessions, but a catalog of pieces is in preparation which will show author or compiler, title, location, and cross-reference information. At Chicago are also to be found manuscripts of the Church Building Society, 1870-1920, and a considerable number of manuscript private journals and diaries, histories of local churches, and files of Congregational periodicals. At both the Congregational Library in Boston and in Chicago photostating and transcribing are permitted; microfilming service may be secured in Chicago.

Perhaps no religious body has used history more effectively than the Church of the Latter Day Saints. Mormon leaders have been conscious of the fact that "loyalty must build its fires on the altars of the past," and they have maintained from the beginning an official press and an official historian "to insure the cultivation of its historical garden."

The Catholics, Baptists, Lutherans, the Reformed Churches, Quakers, and Moravians all have important archival collections which we cannot attempt to describe here.

Besides the strictly denominational archival collections there are a number of State historical societies giving attention to church archives. Among these are the societies in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota. The Wisconsin society, for example, has in its collections a large part of the Shane collection bearing on early Presbyterianism in Kentucky; the Jackson Kemper papers (Episcopalian); the Cutting Marsh papers (Congregational); the Alfred Brunson papers (Methodist). The State societies are also giving increased attention to church history in their publications. Greater encouragement might well be given to the denominational historical societies in the several States, however, to cooperate more closely with the State societies, at least to the extent of using the State buildings as depositories for their collections. This would encourage the centralization of church archival materials and greatly facilitate research in the field of church history as well as provide much more adequate housing for denominational materials.

An attempt has been made by certain university libraries to collect church history materials on a national scale. The University of Chicago probably has given more attention to this kind of project than any other institution, although the Union Theological Seminary in New York and Duke University are more or less committed to this type of undertaking. The University of North Carolina has in its possession an unusual collection of manuscripts relating to church history, among them the Droomgoole papers (Methodist) and the Pettigrew papers (Episcopalian), which presents an excellent example of what a State university can do to promote an interest in research in this relatively undeveloped field.

It would be impossible to list here all of the church archival collections, large and small, in the United States, even if the information concerning them were available. All that has been attempted in this brief account is to provide a general cross-section view of what has been accomplished thus far in gathering and preserving the widely scattered archival materials of American churches.