

Preparing a Manuscripts Guide for a Learned Society

By MURPHY D. SMITH*

American Philosophical Society

DURING September 1961 Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., associate librarian of the American Philosophical Society Library, and I embarked on the project of preparing a guide for the manuscripts collections of the library. We looked forward to garnering the rich harvest of manuscripts assembled over two centuries by this, the oldest continuous learned society in the United States. Much of our time since then has been spent assembling the history of the collections, and it is of this history that I write.

The American Philosophical Society, Held in Philadelphia, for promoting Useful Knowledge, "Proposed & Set on foot [in 1743] by B[enjamin] F[ranklin]—dormant some years: resumed in 1768"¹ began its collection of manuscripts with the minutes of the society. It made no attempt at first to acquire manuscripts *per se*; rather, if anything was acquired "for the advancement of useful knowledge," the society printed it. Such was the case of the first recorded manuscript sent to the society, when David Rittenhouse, on March 22, 1768, "communicated by the hands of Dr. Smith a Description of his new invented Orrery,"² and it was referred to the committee on astronomy. On April 19 the committee reported:

they think Mr Rittenhouse deserves great applause for having projected so useful and curious a machine, and that if it shall answer his Intention, which they have the greatest Reason to expect from his Known Abilities, they are of opinion that it will do honor to himself & to this Province, the Place of his Nativity; and the Committee beg Leave to recommend it to the Society to order his Description to be published; not doubting but it will give Pleasure to Persons of a curious and Philosophical Turn.³

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¹ This is a manuscript note in Franklin's hand on the title page of a copy of volume 1 of the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, Held in Philadelphia, For Promoting Useful Knowledge* (Philadelphia, William and Thomas Bradford, 1771).

² American Philosophical Society, Minutes, Mar. 22, 1768.

³ Minutes, Apr. 19, 1768.

The manuscript was published as the first article of the first volume of the society's first publication: the *Transactions*. Subsequent communications were read and many were praised and printed, but as time passed committees grew more blasé and consequently less effusive in their praise.

Manuscript items, acquired occasionally through the years, were preserved and became the basis of the archives of the society. It appears that the society originally planned no library whatsoever. As items began to accumulate, however, something had to be done to preserve them. And so, before the American Revolution, a library was organized and the first librarian, David Rittenhouse, was appointed. The society rarely purchased items; it received them from eminent men or as exchange. With the first volume of the *Transactions* in 1771 the society began to exchange publications with other learned organizations, and this exchange has continued with some of these to the present. The American Philosophical Society Library, as William E. Lingelbach, librarian emeritus, has aptly said, "is the product . . . not of a great collector or Maecenas, but of the interest and devotion of the officers and members—scientists and scholars—of a great Society, united, says the Charter, 'for promoting useful knowledge.'"⁴

By 1801 scientists and scholars were interested enough in the library so that a special committee was formed "to collect information respecting the past and present state of this country," for "the American Philosophical Society have always considered the antiquity, changes, and present state of their own country as primary objects of their research." Membership of this committee was of extremely high caliber: Thomas Jefferson, Gen. James Wilkinson, Caspar Wistar, Charles Willson Peale, and Jonathan Williams, Jr. Appended to Jefferson's name on the list of committee members is: "President of the American Philosophical Society, at Monticello in Virginia." Had Jefferson lived nearer Philadelphia, better results might have been obtained. As it was, the committee seems to have done little more than to circularize its intention of collecting information for the society and to reprint this circular in the *Transactions*, volume 5.

Basically, the collection of manuscripts began in 1815, when the Historical and Literary Committee was formed. That remark-

⁴ William E. Lingelbach, "The American Philosophical Society Library From 1942 To 1952, With a Survey of Its Historical Background," in American Philosophical Society, *Proceedings*, 97:471-492 (Philadelphia, 1953).

Sp. 18. 1840 - Read.

Champlot Sep 17/40

Mr. Vaughan Esq

Dear Sir

Upon Conversing with
my Sister respecting the Papers
of Dr Franklin bequeathed by
Wm. T Franklin Esq to my Father
we have Concluded they cannot be
better disposed of than by Present-
ing to the Society of which he was
the founder.

I remain
very respectfully
Yrs

Grandson of Dr B Franklin
to whom the Doct bequeathed
his Library & MSS In Vaughan Lib of APS
Chas. P. F. W.

Gift of the Franklin Papers

—Courtesy of the American Philosophical Society

Answered

Dear Sir, I hope I shall soon have done troubling you. I have to beg your pardon for having once or twice presumed to suggest a difference of opinion from you who know so much better. Ignorance will always do so. I have since convinced myself that you were right and I wrong on two points. 1. The Delawares are really as you say a branch of the Algonquin nation, or rather of that general description of Indians whom the French call so. 2. They are the same whom the French call *Loups*. It is true, however, that Carver did servilely copy Lahontan's, but the Chippeways are not the less a branch of the same nation with the Delawares. I should also like to know whether the Shawanese language is a dialect of the same stock?

I beg leave to trouble you with a few more questions:

1. Are the words so frequently used by us: Calamater, Tomohawks, Wampan, Paupoose (a child), Sagamore, & lastly Sauwinah, to be traced to the Algonquin or Leni Lenape Dialects or any of them? or are they of the Iroquois stock? Pray give me their etymology, if you know it.

2. Can the words of the Delaware language be transposed in speaking as the Latin & German, or is there a fixed order as in English. For instance, was ich habe gesehen — was ich gesehen habe — &c.

3. Do the Indians learn European languages easily, & do they in general pronounce them well?

4. How do you reconcile the fact which the Delawares allege of their coming from over the Mississippi, with the undoubted fact that their language or dialect from the same stock, are or were spoken all along our Eastern coast from Nova-Scotia to North Carolina? Is it not more probable that they are an Eastern than a Western People? Are we to give credit to all their traditions without judging for ourselves?

Again excuse the trouble that I give you, & believe me when I assure you that I am with great veneration & respect

Dear Sir

Your most obed^t Hum^l Serv^t

Peter S. Du Ponceau

Additional Question:

How far did the nations extend who called the Delaware *grand fathers*, & acknowledged their superiority? Did the Indian nations of New England & Nova-Scotia acknowledge it & call them so? Did the Shawanese, Chippeways, Micamis, Algonquins proper & Kristonwau or Killistnoes of

able Franco-American, Peter Stephen Du Ponceau, was made corresponding secretary, and in many ways he became the committee. On August 11, 1815, the committee adopted the following resolution:

That the Chairman & Secretaries be authorized to Solicit thro' the Channel of the newspapers or other periodical publications or otherwise in Such manner & form as they shall think most expedient the aid of those Citizens & others who may be possessed of public or private documents, or be otherwise acquainted with interesting facts Sufficiently authenticated & coming within the range of the objects of this Committee.⁵

Du Ponceau personally wrote such men as Thomas Jefferson, Elias Boudinot, Isaiah Thomas, and David Hosack, informing them of the committee's aim and asking their assistance. And the newspaper *Aurora*, on September 5, 1815, published an open letter asking the donation to the society of "the historical memoirs of individuals, public documents, scarce pamphlets, manuscript notes, public and private letters from eminent men, and from men of knowledge and observation: in short, every thing which may be considered as interesting to this country in an historical, statistical, geographical or topographical point of view." A note at the end of this "Literary Notice" read: "The editors of newspapers and other periodical publications, friendly to the literature of their country, are invited to give publicity to the above."

Although our records show that the committee was really active for only three years, the response to this appeal was little short of astounding. People in the United States were beginning to be concerned over the lack of repositories for precious manuscripts; Massachusetts and New York had already organized historical societies to collect and preserve such records.

That remarkable past president of the United States (and of the American Philosophical Society), Thomas Jefferson, presented such items, among others, as his collection of American Indian language manuscripts; a copy of Benjamin Hawkins' "Sketch of the Creek Country in the years 1798-1799," written in Hawkins' hand; and *Mémoire sur la possibilité, les avantages, et le moyens d'ouvrir un canal dans l'Amerique Septentrionale, pour communiquer de la mer Atlantique . . . à la mer Pacifique*. Jefferson endorsed the last item: "This memoir was procured for me by the Chevalier Bourgoyne [Chevalier Jean François Bourgoing], au-

⁵ Historical and Literary Committee of the American Philosophical Society, Minutes, Aug. 11, 1815.

thor of the travels into Spain." Jefferson also urged others to leave manuscripts to the society, and such treasures as the Lewis and Clark journals and the William Byrd journals for the history, and the secret history, of the running of the Virginia-North Carolina boundary line were acquired.

Mr. Du Ponceau, interested in the study of linguistics, solicited and received much information pertaining to the American Indian from the Moravian missionary Johann Gottlieb Ernest Hecke-welder and from others.

The committee accepted copies of manuscripts with the same enthusiasm as it accepted originals. Copies of many early laws and records of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania were presented by Redmond Conyngham. Mrs. Deborah Norris Logan and her husband, Dr. George Logan, presented copies of correspondence of their ancestor James Logan, secretary to William Penn. With such gifts, the manuscript collection of the library began to develop.

Subsequently, however, little active collecting was done. Items were presented to the society, and some of these gifts were of great value and of major import. Joel Poinsett, for example, gave the society many valuable papers, books, and Latin American items; among this group was an Aztec item, the Montezuma tribute roll, since returned to Mexico. Mrs. Dolly Payne Madison presented her husband's "meteorological journal" for 1784-93, in two volumes. The primary gift of manuscripts to the library was made by Charles and Mary Fox—the Benjamin Franklin papers. This vast mass of papers, bequeathed by Benjamin Franklin to his grandson, William Temple Franklin, was left in America with George Fox, the friend of Temple Franklin; and after Temple's death it found its home in the library. No other gift to the society has ever matched this one; with this gift the American Philosophical Society Library became a primary repository for American history. Meanwhile other institutions grew and interest in the society waned. Major changes in attitudes toward societies are noticeable in the emergence of State and local historical societies and the development of a great national scientific organization, the Smithsonian Institution.

The library did not undergo major change for almost a century; it merely continued to grow. Shortly after receiving the munificent bequest of Richard Alexander Fullerton Penrose and thus acquiring financial freedom, the society appointed a Special Committee on the Library. Its report, made in 1941, stated that "since this

Special Committee was established, not a few members of the Society have spoken of the fine reputation the Library bears in their communities. Upon investigation, this high repute proved almost invariably to be based upon the use of manuscripts, chiefly in the Franklin collection, but also of journals of travel and of rare printed material also on similar lines." The special committee stressed that the members of the society should not think of the library contents as simply valuable and unused material relating to the history of science, but should realize that the library possesses "in the Society's archives and collections an extraordinary record of intellectual interests and activities in this country." In conclusion, the committee's report "reiterates that an obligation rests upon the Society to make known the contents of its Library, for the benefit of students, in other ways than by forcing them to come to the building and consult the card catalogue."⁶

The library began in 1943 to publish a serial, the *Library Bulletin*, also published as part of the *Proceedings* (1948–59).⁷ This publication has guided many scholars to the library. Further publicity for the library has come from the erection of a handsome new building, across the street from Philosophical Hall, the home of the society, on Independence Square. Although such publicity was good, it was judged insufficient and plans were formulated for compiling published guides to the manuscript collections.

One of the major fields of the library, stemming from the interest of such men as Thomas Jefferson and Peter Stephen Du Ponceau, is its collection of manuscripts relating to the American Indian. In addition to its Indian collections built up for more than 180 years, the library acquired in 1945 the huge Franz Boas collection of American Indian linguistics. At present, these American Indian manuscripts occupy roughly 20 percent of the shelving for manuscripts. The late Clyde Kluckhohn, anthropologist, recommended that a guide to these collections be prepared,

to provide eventually a complete listing of the data at hand on each language and tribe together with a brief evaluation of the reliability and significance of such data. The listing will encompass linguistic, ethnological and historical sources whether published or unpublished. The "Guide" will of course indicate the relevant dates of the information and what topics (such as vocabulary, grammar, material culture, social organization, etc.) are covered . . . The

⁶ "Report of the Special Committee on the Future Policy of the Library," in American Philosophical Society, *Year Book*, 1941, p. 275–281 (Philadelphia, 1942).

⁷ The *American Philosophical Society Library Bulletin* was published for 17 years, beginning in 1943 and ceasing with the issue of 1959.

availability of this "Guide" will make much more economical the work of scholars and should greatly increase the utilization of the Society's holdings.⁸

This guide is being prepared by John Finley Freeman. His report on it appears in *Ethnohistory* (vol. 8, no. 2; Spring 1961). Dr. Freeman's guide will be a separate finding aid, complementary to but not incorporated into ours.

The holdings of the library, as the special committee reported, contain "an extraordinary record of intellectual interests and activities in this country." It is hoped that our projected guide will make the contents of the collections—and the collections themselves—more widely known. For example, an outstanding collection, especially in the field of American science, is the vast mass of the society's own archives. Many major scientists were society members, and active members, and many of their communications and letters are available. The archives are individually cataloged through the year 1895 and are arranged chronologically for easy use. Also in the library are the Peale-Sellers papers, a very large group of papers of such outstanding men as Charles Willson Peale, Rembrandt Peale, Nathan Sellers, Coleman Sellers, and George Escol Sellers. These papers afford a marvelous study of a large family and its artistic, social, intellectual, scientific, and technological interests over 150 years. Charles Willson Peale, the famous painter, was also an outstanding naturalist and inventor. His museum in Philadelphia and the museums he aided his sons to set up in Baltimore and New York City spread interest in natural history and natural philosophy. He invented and manufactured the polygraph, which made copies of letters without carbon paper or letter-press methods; and he worked on such projects as perfecting the making of false teeth and developing the velocipede. Rembrandt Peale was, of course, a famous painter and naturalist of his day. Nathan Sellers was a paper maker and, with his brother David, a maker of machinery. Coleman Sellers, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, is well represented in his correspondence, ca. 1880–1900, with his architect son, Horace Wells Sellers, concerning the harnessing of Niagara Falls to manufacture electricity. George Escol Sellers promoted railroads in the United States and actively worked for the building of a rail line across the Isthmus of Panama.

⁸ Clyde Kluckhohn, "The Library's New Program in American Indian Linguistics and Ethnohistory," in American Philosophical Society, *Proceedings*, 103:768–769 (Philadelphia, 1959).

Many people still do not know that there is in the library a major collection of the papers of Charles Darwin and papers about the spread of his theory of evolution. This collection is supplemented with microfilm from the Darwin papers at Down House, Kent, England.

Social history is well illustrated by the extensive papers of John Frederick Lewis, an outstanding Philadelphia lawyer and philanthropist. His papers were acquired, chiefly, to keep them from being scrapped. And what a rich treasure for the social and intellectual historian this collection turned out to be! It contains records about the building of Mr. Lewis' great collections of medieval manuscripts and cuneiform inscriptions, now in the Free Library of Philadelphia. Activity in the intellectual life of the city, especially the artistic and musical life, is well documented. There is also material on the furnishing of his great city house, his carriages and automobiles, country estate management, and his legal activity.

Other manuscripts of note acquired over the years are meteorological observations kept at Spring Mill, Pa., 1787-1800, by Peter Legaux; Chief Justice John Marshall's opinions; the correspondence of General Nathanael Greene, of Richard Henry Lee and Arthur Lee, and of General Weedon; and miscellaneous volumes of notes and records kept by Gotthilf Heinrich Ernst Mühlenberg. These are a fair but very spotty sample of the holdings in the library.

On such disparate groups, accumulated over so many years, Whitfield J. Bell and I are working. We feel that the only sensible approach is strictly historical. We are using the *Guide to the Manuscript Collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania* as our exemplar. Our entries will be alphabetical, under author, collector, or primary person represented in the collection and will contain the same material, greatly augmented, that was furnished the Library of Congress for the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. Where possible, we give the name of the major figure of the collection, his life span, a brief identification of him, a note on his membership in the American Philosophical Society (if he was a member), and reference to biographical information about him in a standard reference work. The name of the collection or item follows, with dates and physical description, including the language, if other than English. A brief description, including major figures in the collection, is then given,

unless the entire collection has been published or there is a published guide for it. A sample entry is the following:

Lewis, Meriwether, 1744-1809. Explorer, governor. APS [American Philosophical Society] 1803. *DAB* [*Dictionary of American Biography*].

Journal of the river trip from Pittsburgh to winter camp; Aug. 30-Dec. 12, 1803. A.D. [Autograph document] 126 leaves of which 95 leaves are by Lewis and 31 leaves are notes by Nicholas Biddle, containing questions and answers with Clark when he visited Clark in 1810.

Printed: *The Journals of Captain Meriwether Lewis and Sergeant John Ordway, kept on the Expedition of Western Exploration, 1803-1806*; ed. with introduction and notes by Milo M. Quaife. Madison, The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, *Collections*, vol. xxii. 1916.

Deposited, 1915, by Edward and Charles Biddle. Presented by Charles J. Biddle, June 1949.

We believe that such information will be sufficient, and we hope that the Guide will be widely disseminated and thus will attract more scholars to study the treasures in the library. The more we work on the varied collections, the more we agree with the special committee: "In the Society's archives and collections [is] an extraordinary record of intellectual interests and activities in this country."

Whatever Is Presented Will Be Carefully Preserved

I have commenced a collection for the State Library of letters and of the manuscript matter relating to the history of the State and the lives of its early and leading citizens. I wish it also to contain autograph letters by the distinguished men of the State, their manuscript speeches reports and other writings, anything in short which will throw light on their character, intellectual peculiarities, habits of labor, &c &c. I would be glad to have any manuscripts of yours, speeches, or whatever you may have preserved, also letters of eminent statesmen with whom you may have corresponded. Whatever is presented will be carefully preserved in the fire proof State Library.

—RUTHERFORD B. HAYES, Governor of Ohio, to ex-U. S. Senator William Allen, later Governor of Ohio, Oct. 27, 1870 (Allen papers, Library of Congress). [Ruth L. Douthit, reference librarian, Ohio State Library, informs us that the papers of Arthur St. Clair, R. G. Meigs, Thomas Worthington, and E. A. Brown were received by the library during Hayes' administration as Governor. A packet of miscellaneous papers, including a letter from Allen, may have been received in response to Hayes' letter to Allen. —Ed.]