

# The Prehistory and Origins of the National Historical Publications Commission

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AS you enter the National Archives Building from Pennsylvania Avenue you may see, at the left of the lobby, a bronze portrait plaque placed there in December 1955 by the American Historical Association "IN TRIBUTE TO J. FRANKLIN JAMESON 1859-1937 WHOSE PERSISTENT AND WISE GUIDANCE LED TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES."

Although Jameson lived to see the monumental success of his long campaign for the National Archives, he witnessed only the nominal success of his much longer and more difficult campaign for a National Historical Publications Commission. It remained for others, especially for Dr. Philip Hamer, Executive Director, and the members of the present Commission, the tenth anniversary of which we are today recognizing, to bring to full fruition Jameson's plans and hopes.

Many of you knew Jameson personally and all of you know much about his services for the advancement of American historical scholarship, but a brief summary of his career may be useful as background of this discourse. He was the son of a Boston schoolmaster, John Jameson (the son used the name J. Franklin throughout his life), and, on his mother's side, a lineal descendant of Capt. Edward Johnson, first historian of New England and author of *The Wonder-Working Providence of Sion's Saviour in New England*. Jameson was graduated from Amherst College in 1879, standing first in a class which included Henry C. Folger, whose

\*The author is director emeritus of the American Council of Learned Societies. His steady contribution, in more than 60 years of professional activity, to the advancement of the historical and archival professions is so well known that he needs no introduction to our readers. He is a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists and was its second president (1939-41). The paper here printed is a revision of a paper of the same title read before the Tenth Anniversary Luncheon of the members of the National Historical Publications Commission and the editors of its sponsored works held in New York City on December 29, 1960, during the annual meeting of the American Historical Association.

spiritual heir, Dr. Louis Wright, is happily moderating this session.

From his first year at Amherst he resolved to devote his lifework to the study and teaching of history, for which indeed he had unusual qualifications in the form of a remarkable memory, an orderly mind in which he could store information with the power of instant recall, and a constructive imagination. After graduation and a year of high school teaching, being unable to find funds for an ambitious program of study in German universities, he entered the recently founded Johns Hopkins University, where he spent 8 formative years as fellow and teaching associate. In 1882 he received the first doctorate in history conferred by the Hopkins and decided that American history should be his chief field of work. He made an ambitious plan for a *magnum opus* on the constitutional and political history of the States of the Union but did not go beyond publishing an "Introduction" to that formidable undertaking. More significant, in view of his future work in the laying of sound foundations for research and writing, were the copying, editing, and publication of the records (1735-88) of the Town of Amherst, and the comment in his diary, June 11, 1883: ". . . it is one of those things that every town ought to have done for it; if all did it would make an invaluable body of material for historical works of several kinds." Of similar significance during his later years at the Hopkins was his unsuccessful effort to secure permission to edit and publish the records of the Virginia Company in the possession of the Library of Congress. Most of Jameson's writings while at the Hopkins were relevant to his master interest in solid foundations for work in American history, the filling in of gaps, and the suggestion of fresh points of view. Among such were his lectures on the history of historical writing in America (published as a book in 1891) and his course for graduates on historical method and criticism. After the Hopkins there followed 13 years at Brown University (1888-1901) and 4 at the University of Chicago (1901-5). These teaching years were in turn followed by 32 years of administration—23 as Director of the Department of Historical Research in the Carnegie Institution of Washington and 9 as Chief of the Division of Manuscripts in the Library of Congress and holder of its endowed Chair of American History. During all these years he was one of the leading members of the American Historical Association, which he had helped to found in 1884 and of which he became president in 1907; and, from its founding in 1895 until 1928, he was managing editor of the *American Historical Review* except for his 4 years at Chicago. He died in 1937, a few days after his 78th birthday.

Since this paper is chiefly about Jameson's campaign for the National Historical Publications Commission, we must go back to the Hopkins, where he probably had his first idea of such a body. Mention has been made of his efforts to secure permission to edit and publish the records of the Virginia Company in the Library of Congress. As early as 1886 he made urgent representations not only to the Librarian of Congress, Ainsworth Spofford, but also to the Joint Committee on the Library of the House and Senate, without results. Whether or not as a consequence of Jameson's importunate demands, the Civil Appropriations Act of March 3, 1887, provided

that the Secretary of State, the Librarian of Congress, and the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, and their successors in office, are hereby constituted a commission whose duty it shall be to report to Congress the character and value of the historical and other manuscripts belonging to the Government of the United States, and what method and policy should be pursued in regard to editing and publishing the same, or any of them.<sup>1</sup>

This sounds like a National Historical Publications Commission, at least in embryo, but no evidence has been found, in spite of diligent research, that the Commission ever held a meeting or ever reported to Congress. Jameson wrote to his father that he thought the creation of the Commission would only make it more difficult for him to secure permission to edit the papers of the Virginia Company.

The first public statement on behalf of such a commission as we now have was made by Jameson before the American Historical Association in December 1890 in the form of a report on "The Expenditures of Foreign Governments in Behalf of History."<sup>2</sup> Jameson pointed out that, aside from large appropriations for compiling and publishing the *Official Records* of the War of the Rebellion, very little was expended for the publication of other records or papers of great value for many aspects of American history. He contrasted this lack of system with the careful planning in many other countries, on which he reported in detail. In conclusion he presented his proposal:

We desire a comprehensive and well arranged scheme of government publication. We should perceive that we can not have it save by means of some permanent institution through which expert opinion can be brought to bear, not simply at the beginning, or by occasional advice, but all the time. A commission consisting simply of government officials can never meet the requirements, and

. . . A suitable mode of making up and empowering a good working commission would not be difficult to devise. When the Government is ready to do this, European experience should be much consulted. In any case such a commission should have power to edit and publish not only materials in the possession of the Government, but also those which are in private hands. May it soon come into existence.

"Soon" proved to be 44 years, during which Jameson was active in many ways to produce tangible results, even without a governmental commission. The American Historical Association, founded in 1884, had been incorporated by Congress on January 4, 1889, for "the collection and preservation of historical manuscripts, and for kindred purposes in the interest of American history and of history in America."<sup>3</sup> The association, Jameson felt, had not only the duty to accomplish the prescribed purposes but it also had a Government-recognized status. Following Jameson's proposal the association created in 1895 a Historical Manuscripts Commission the chief task of which should be to edit and publish in the association's annual reports, which were printed as public documents, important bodies of manuscript material relating to American history. This commission may be thought of, in some respects, as the prototype of the present Commission, and its membership deserves to be commemorated: Douglas Brymner, of Ottawa; Talcott Williams, of Philadelphia; William F. Trent, of Sewanee, Tennessee; Frederick Jackson Turner, of Madison, Wisconsin; and Jameson, of Brown University, chairman. The association's annual reports were soon swollen with edited collections of historical manuscript materials of great variety and value. Such were the correspondence of John C. Calhoun, the diplomatic archives of the Republic of Texas, despatches from the French ministers to the United States, and many more. But Jameson found still other avenues of publication. As managing editor of the *American Historical Review* from its foundation in 1895, he set aside in each issue space for a section of documents. In the aggregate a great deal of material, both American and foreign, was made public in this manner. Jameson also appealed to the State and local historical societies of the country to publish documentary material and encouraged them to cooperate in exploring the sources of their history, whether located in Washington, as in the case of former Territories, or in foreign countries, as in the case of areas that had been under French or Spanish domination.

The cause of a National Historical Publications Commission was further aided by the American Historical Association in 1899 when

<sup>3</sup> 25 Stat. 640.

it created its Public Archives Commission for the examination of the public records of States, counties, and cities and the publication of guides to such records in the annual reports of the association. Ten years later the Public Archives Commission organized an annual Conference of Archivists, which focused public attention upon the necessity of a national archives establishment and the systematic publication of archival materials.

Towards the turn of the century historians were becoming increasingly conscious of the importance of establishing in the National Capital an active center for the advancement of historical research and publication, and, in 1901, the council of the American Historical Association appointed a committee of three—Charles Francis Adams, Andrew C. McLaughlin, and Jameson, chairman—to consider the possibility of establishing in Washington a national institute for advanced historical studies. In the next year the Carnegie Institution of Washington was founded and Daniel C. Gilman, former president of the Johns Hopkins University, was appointed its first president. Jameson, who had kept Gilman informed respecting the plan for an institute of historical studies, suggested that the new institution might be interested in promoting work in that field. Gilman, who was then naming a number of advisory committees in different fields of knowledge, adopted the committee of the association as one of the institution's advisory committees and asked it to propose a plan for the organization of historical work by the institution. Such a plan was drawn up and presented in the form of a report with recommendations to the trustees of the institution. This report was printed in the first yearbook of the Carnegie Institution, along with reports by other advisory committees. The essence of the plan was the preparation and publication of guides to the sources of American history in the archives of the Federal Government and in the archives and libraries of foreign countries, and the editing and publication of collections of important documents and papers still in manuscript. Provision for editing the *American Historical Review* was also recommended.

The trustees of the Carnegie Institution adopted the recommendations of the report and proceeded to give effect to them by providing for the preparation of a guide to the archives of the Federal Government and by creating a Bureau (later Department) of Historical Research, of which McLaughlin was named organizing director. The general program was quickly underway, and when McLaughlin returned to his professorship in the University of Michigan, in 1905, Jameson was appointed director of the department.



Within a few months he resumed his active campaign for a National Historical Publications Commission in a paper read before the Columbia Historical Society of Washington in February 1906 on "Gaps in the Published Records of United States History."<sup>4</sup> In this he presented an account of the recent creation by the Government of the Netherlands of an Advisory Committee for Historical Publications, and he rapidly reviewed the present state of historical documentary publication in the United States, strongly urging that the United States should have a commission similar in purpose and plan to that of the Netherlands. In order that such a proposal should have a vigorous sponsor Jameson turned to the American Historical Association, over which he presided in 1907, and obtained its agreement to appoint a special committee to review the needs of historical documentary publication in the United States and to propose a plan for dealing with them through a national commission. Such a committee was appointed by Jameson's successor as president of the association, George B. Adams, who named Worthington C. Ford as chairman and Jameson as secretary. Before this committee could be organized, however, Secretary of State Elihu Root, to whom Jameson had earlier presented his plan, came forward with a suggestion on how the support of the Government might be assured—namely, by the attachment of the association's committee to the President's Committee on Department Methods, popularly known as the Keep Commission. President Theodore Roosevelt, who had approved the proposal in principle but who thought that he had no available funds for giving effect to it, agreed; and he instructed the Committee on Department Methods to adopt the committee of the association as an "assistant committee." This was promptly done and the new committee now had Government status and support. It proceeded at once to carry out its mandate and in January 1908 presented its report, with recommended legislation, to the President, who transmitted it to the Congress a month later.<sup>5</sup> Only one hearing on the bill was held—on January 5, 1910, by the House Committee on the Library. Statements in support of the bill were made by Jameson, Charles Francis Adams, Alfred T. Mahan, and Charles M. Andrews, all of whom had been members of the special committee, and also by Herbert Putnam and Miss Ruth Putnam, as well as by H. T. Colenbrander, Secretary of the Dutch committee.

The bill, which was for the creation of a Commission on National Historical Publications, never came before either House of Con-

<sup>4</sup> Published in *American Historical Review*, 11: 817-831 (July 1906).

<sup>5</sup> 60th Cong., 2d sess., *S. Doc.* 714.

gress for a vote. It lay in the limbo of the files of Congress until 1934.

During these years Jameson used every method and approach to bring the bill to a vote. His letters reveal how earnestly he tried to have it considered and his feeling of discouragement. In the meanwhile, however, he directed the work of the Department of Historical Research as well as his campaign for the National Archives. Under his direction the department performed many of the functions that the proposed commission might have undertaken. The department had already, in 1907, published a second and enlarged edition of the *Guide to the Archives of the Government of the United States at Washington*, and during the years it explored the archives and libraries of foreign countries, publishing some 20 volumes of guides to the materials found in them relating to American history. This operation greatly aided the project of the Library of Congress for copying such documents. The Department of Historical Research also published more than 30 large volumes of documents, which constituted major sources of the history of the United States, including *European Treaties Bearing on the History of the United States and Its Dependencies* (1917-37); *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress* (1912-26); *Proceedings and Debates of the British Parliaments Respecting North America* (1924-41); *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro* (1926-37); *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America* (1930-35); and *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson* (1926-35). Suggestions by Jameson had been responsible for numerous other publications, such as *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787* (1911-37), edited by Max Farrand, and *Instructions to the British Ministers to the United States 1791-1812* (1941), edited by Bernard Mayo.

Jameson resolutely adhered to the original purpose of the department, which was set forth in the 1902 report of the advisory committee of which he had been chairman and which he restated in 1906 in his first report as director. The purpose was not to write historical monographs but to make known for the benefit and use of historical scholars the major sources of the history of the United States and thus to lay solid foundations for their work. Of this declared policy, he added, "for us at any rate *melius est petere fontes quam sectari rivulos*."

The nominal success of Jameson's campaign for the National Historical Publications Commission, to which reference was made in the opening paragraph of this discourse, came in 1934—6 years

after Jameson's retirement from the Department of Historical Research and appointment as Chief of the Division of Manuscripts in the Library of Congress and only 3 years before his death. While working on the legislation governing the establishment of the National Archives, he recognized that provision for the National Commission could be incorporated, and this was done. Thus set up, the Commission held three meetings, two of which were attended by Jameson, and then lapsed into inactivity. This was due in part to failure of the law to provide a secretariat for the Commission but still more to the necessary concentration of the National Archives on its organization and problems. The story of the first years of the Commission of 1934 and its failure and of its reorganization and reactivation under President Truman, inspired by the first volume of Julian Boyd's *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, is well told by Dr. Hamer in his 1954 report to the Commission, which also supplements this paper in its account of the background of the Commission.<sup>6</sup> But that is part of the history of the Commission itself, not of its prehistory, to which I have confined myself.

In conclusion I think it is fitting to name the members of the "assistant committee" who created the National Commission on paper, though to give it life was not within their mandate. No one of them is now living but their service deserves to be commemorated:

WORTHINGTON C. FORD, *chairman*

CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS

CHARLES M. ANDREWS

WILLIAM A. DUNNING

ALBERT BUSHNELL HART

ANDREW C. McLAUGHLIN

ALFRED T. MAHAN

FREDERICK J. TURNER

J. FRANKLIN JAMESON, *secretary*<sup>7</sup>

The document signed by the above scholars deserves to be made available to all scholars for their understanding of how a great problem was studied and for their inspiration.

<sup>6</sup> *A National Program for the Publication of Historical Documents; a Report to the President by the National Historical Publications Commission* (Washington, 1954).

<sup>7</sup> The chief printed source for the work and life of J. Franklin Jameson is a collection of some 500 of his letters, from 1880 to 1937, but most abundant for the Washington period, 1905-28, edited by two former members of his staff, now deceased, Elizabeth Donnan and Leo F. Stock, with a long biographical introduction by Miss Donnan. The volume was published by the American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia in 1956 as vol. 42 of its *Memoirs*, under the title *An Historian's World*. The Jameson papers have been presented to the Library of Congress by Francis C. Jameson of Washington, son of J. Franklin Jameson.