

THE RAAB COLLECTION
Philadelphia

ADDRESS AT THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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The past defines the present, and history provides the window through which we view its incidents and personalities, determine its impact, and shape our understanding of where we are today. Historians play a key role in this process and strive to reconstruct the events of the past by bringing together diverse and often confusing information, identifying patterns, delving into meanings, and portraying individuals who rise to heights within their times. Though they may make use of original source material, the historian's perspective is essentially top-down - seeing past events and the actors in them from the mountain peak of today's viewpoint with a panorama of small objects distantly below.

Autographs (by which we mean original letters, manuscripts and documents) reverse that perspective. They picture events in their contemporary context, without the lens of time and history, and present the men and women in their own day and setting, with their own outlook, without the intercession of the historian, or indeed anyone, as interpreter. They enable us to see and appreciate both the impact of people on events, and its corollary, the impact of circumstances on people. Broad and consequential currents of history are brought to the level of what one individual saw, thought, experienced or directed at a specific place and moment. And since that individual was often an important actor in the drama of his times, what he or she said or wrote matters.

On the human level, from the perspective of the individual leaving an autograph behind, it affords a chance to be remembered. The Raab Collection used to have a poem written by the artist and inventor of the telegraph, Samuel F.B. Morse, in which he wrote, "There is a moral in an autograph. Man's earthly life is limited to the span of threescore and ten, but all his acts have upon them the stamp of immortality, and even in the insignificant scratch that symbolizes his earthly name, is seen an example of a life that outlives him; that survives long after the hand that has written has mouldered to dust." The great collector and dealer A.S.W. Rosenbach amplified on this sentiment over half a century ago, commenting "Here are what individuals said they did when they did it, what they said they believed in when they believed in it." Thus, autographs give us a unique access to the past and the tools to interpret that past, while also aiding us in assessing its impact on our present-day world. Great institutions such as this exist in part to facilitate research because autographs have these very attributes.

But understanding and documenting history is not the only reason autographs are collected and preserved. A second is the desire to touch, to feel a connection to, an important figure from the past or event in which they participated. As Thomas Madigan, a renowned autograph dealer of yesteryear, stated, "Between the present and the past there exists no more intimate personal connection than an autograph. It is the living symbol of its author." This fact stands out all the more when you consider the other artifacts a person leaves behind. The hat Ulysses S. Grant wore requires documentary proof for the acceptance of its genuineness and no man now living saw him wear it. There are in existence at least three pens said to have been used by Lincoln in signing the Emancipation Proclamation and no less than three suits of clothes said to have been worn by him at the time he was assassinated. How can we really know which of these, if any, were his? The same problem exists with the clothing of Franklin D. Roosevelt or a memento that is said to have hung in Woodrow Wilson's office. And the purported hair of long-deceased notables that has become ubiquitous in the marketplace, who can be certain of that when all the person's contemporaries, and most of the hair's previous owners, are gone? But an autograph is, in a sense, self-proving, and thus constitutes the most reliable intimate and personal link between the present and the past.

Men and women of great principles, of extraordinary achievements, of profound consequence and inspirational leadership, of human feelings and emotions, come alive in the autographs they left behind. It is the product of their hands, minds, and even of the souls of the writers, and portrays their very essence. In their writings, they clearly reveal to us the intimate details of their public and private lives. So autographs are, in Madigan's words, "The true living word shadows of the great," and the inclination to collect and to treasure them is a very natural one. The British literary figure Dr. Samuel Johnson, concurred, saying that a man's letters are the mirror of his heart, that in his letters "his soul lies naked." He is seconded by the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who said "There can be no doubt that the handwriting of a man is related to his thought and character, and that we may thereby gain a certain impression of his ordinary mode of life and conduct." Edgar Allan Poe pondered this subject and offered his own thoughtful hierarchy and visualization - "Next to the person of a distinguished man of letters, we desire to see his portrait; next to his portrait, his autograph. In the latter, especially, there is something which seems to bring him before us in his true idiosyncrasy in his character of scribe."

After decades in the autograph field, I am convinced that these great authors were right. The moving documents, significant manuscripts and revealing letters that regularly arrive at our office have a voice, a true and personal voice, and speak eloquently of their brief moment in time. To hold them is to have the privilege of feeling that moment ourselves.

Hunting these treasures

Our life at the Raab Collection is devoted to history, the journey of seeking it, and of finding its most precious mementos and artifacts. We recognize that the scarce gems are very difficult to find, and that identifying and appreciating them is an art not a science. That is the very task that we undertake. We see ourselves as, to borrow Meriwether Lewis's term, a Corps of Discovery. And we are dedicated to the proposition of guiding and facilitating others in that same endeavor.

Our quest is indeed a timeless one, as the ancients searched for and collected autographs just as we do. Pliny, who was an eyewitness to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD, wrote permits a bit dispondantly that letters of Julius Caesar had become quite rare, but that fortunately those of Augustus remained plentiful. Petrarch went from one monastery to the next combing their archives for unknown manuscripts.

Our quest is packed with adventure and excitement, discoveries amusing and awe-inspiring, disappointments and “eureka” moments.

The starting point for each situation is often the same - recognizing potential in a piece that is not, perhaps, readily apparent on its face. Returning to Meriwether Lewis, we saw a document signed by him at auction. Others apparently saw it as a routine receipt; we saw the date - six weeks after Lewis returned from the Lewis and Clark Expedition - our interest was aroused - this must be something more. We immediately set about researching it, the information was initially elusive, but we were soon able to prove that it was Lewis' signed receipt for his pay for the Lewis and Clark Expedition! What an exhilarating moment! Another interesting receipt was given by Andrew Jackson to a boat pilot for services in Florida. The very early Florida dateline caused us to look further, and we found that this was the pay receipt for the man who guided Jackson into Florida when he captured it for the United States.

This willingness to reject short cuts and put in the long research hours necessary until all theories are resolved and all facts accounted for is the key. Almost a decade ago, we came upon a slave manumission document in a stack of apparently minor papers being offered for sale. The document was dated in the early 1830's, and unlike other manumissions which mainly get right to the point, this one, unusually, contained a long recitation of the ills of slavery and read like an abolition tract. What could this be, just another minor document or something more - our interest was piqued? The signatory was a David Nelson, whose name we did not recognize, but off we went to the library. Finally we discovered that he was a slaveholder who had an epiphany, freed his slaves, moved to Illinois and founded the abolition movement there. He converted the martyr Owen Lovejoy to the cause and influenced many others - and this was the very document in

which he liberated his slaves and embarked on his pioneering campaign to free those in bondage.

Another time we came across a portion of a Theodore Roosevelt speech, typed but heavily annotated in his hand. What could this be? Research proved it was part of the actual address he gave in founding the Progressive Party in 1912.

Sometimes we discover that an autograph has an unexpected attribute. A few years ago we saw a dealer listing for a Robert E. Lee letter to George Meade and dated July 4, 1863. It was well-appreciated that this was the day after the Battle of Gettysburg and that the letter was a rarity. Lots of research showed that the letter had crossed the battle lines on the hallowed battlefield of Gettysburg before the Confederates left, that it related to a Confederate colonel wounded in Pickett's Charge, and was the only letter of Lee written at Gettysburg remaining in private hands. We were also able to confirm our suspicion that an 1864 letter of William Herndon to Abraham Lincoln, and endorsed by Lincoln, was the last thing signed by both the famous law partners.

One of our most important finds was a U.S. Supreme Court decision on Constitutional law signed by Chief Justice John Marshall in 1816. We recognized right away that this was a rare document but it presented a number of questions. The first was - how did it get out of the National Archives and into private hands? Research proved that prior to 1836, Supreme Court decisions were not deposited in the National Archives - they were sent to the legal reporters to be typeset for publication, and in some cases, then on to the litigants. Perhaps for this reason, very few originals of these early Supreme Court decision have survived. The second was - how rare is this? We contacted the John Marshall Papers, checked the holdings of likely institutions, and researched sale and auction records. In the end, it turned out to be the only such decision signed by Marshall known to remain in private hands. Perhaps our greatest surprise was to discover that the Lincoln signed document we had purchased ordering the blockade of the Confederacy in April 1861 was more - it constituted the legal commencement of the Civil War!

We are not only hunting and preserving the pieces. We are hunting and unraveling the stories. A manuscript can be found and sold and even loved while its story remains lost. This is the benefit of loving what you collect. We spend the lions share of our time behind books and on research sites, hunting for the story that will give context to documents. Every time we receive a piece, we break it down to its elements and build from there.

We once bought a pardon signed by Franklin Pierce said to be the only known pardon under the fugitive slave act. Research sold that this claim was not true. The date was too early to be subject to that law. Its real story was yet more interesting. The pardonee was a black person who had been caught funneling slaves north through the underground

railroad. This was a pardon for a black person for harboring slaves who were attempting to escape southern oppression in the leadup to the Civil War – the only one we know of anywhere.

Just two days ago, we received in the mail a curious note from George III which read “St. James Palace, June 4, 1781. “The letters from Ld. Cornwallis show how well he has conducted his enterprise. I desire Ld. Geo. Germain will direct Capt. Broderick to be here at St. James’s at Seven this Evening that I may hear any thing he has to say in addition.” The date drew our attention. Also, it is increasingly rare to find anything from George III relating to the American war. So what was this? What were those letters? Who was Captain Broderick? Much of the momentum for the American victory occurred after battles in the Southern campaign leading up to the surrender of Cornwallis’ army at Yorktown to the French and Americans. The battle of Guilford Court which took place on March 15 is considered the decisive one, for although Cornwallis kept the field and won the day, Nathanael Greene’s army had given the British a wound from which they would not heal. Cornwallis’ was a pyrric victory.

March 15 then is the battle preceding our June note from George III. But it only takes 3-5 weeks to sail to England. Why was George III just now responding. Surely someone must have questioned the credentials of his Commander right?

Luckily the letters of Germain, who was George III’s secretary of state to the American colonies, are published. So are George III’s and Lord Cornwallis. Herein lies the context. Who what why and when. Cornwallis writes three letters the 17th of March after his “victory.” One he writes to General Clinton, giving a brief self congratulations and saying that he will send to England Broderick, his nephew and chief aide to camp. Such a signal victory requires an in person triumph at the court of St. James. Two letters he writes to Germain and the King, and these are the triumph of the research. The first is a full account of his Southern campaign strategy. The second is an official report of the battle of Guilford Court. When the King receives these, surely he will be pleased. After all, Cornwallis describes a great army of 8,000 men or more, when in fact there were fewer than 4,500. But we’re back to the time. Why did the King want to see Broderick in June and not when they arrived in early May or even late April? Why was Broderick still in England?

The answer lies in print – in the London Gazette to be exact. The King waited to react to Cornwallis because the letters would not arrive until early June, when Broderick would find his way to England. The June 2-5 editions of the London Gazette show the newly arrived correspondence ordered printed by the King.

So we arrive at the end of our project with the following timeline. March 15 – the battle. March 17 – Cornwallis writes his letters. May 19, Clinton’s news of the victory at

Guilford arrives in London. June 2 – the full report arrives at the King. June 4 – he summons Cornwallis’ representative to hear the in person news – with this very note. You see, two lines can say a lot of things.

My last example relates to a set of autographs that stand at the confluence of The Raab Collection and the HSP. Very recently, we saw a pair of documents in a dealer catalog purporting to be John Brown’s last will. There were two distinct copies in the set, plus it appeared from the description that other versions of Brown’s will existed elsewhere - perhaps quite a few, all purporting to be in his hand. We contacted the dealer only to find that there was more confusion than light on the subject. Can we untangle this mess? Who has what? And what relationship did each play to Brown’s final days on earth? We set about the task of finding out. In the end, we sorted the thing out completely. It turned out that there were only two authentic wills signed by Brown, and the others, including one in the set we were looking at, were copies made by family members after Brown’s death. He wrote a will on December 1, 1859, which is in the HSP, then followed it up on December 2 with a later version, signed hours before his death, making bequests to his prosecutor and jailor. That will, his last will, was ours.

Who Collects?

The mentality of the collector is as idiosyncratic as are people. But the bug, once you catch, is incurable. What you choose to collect is in a sense inconsequential. You begin with the premise that you choose what you like, and then buy the best available that you can afford within that selection. Once you get past that point, people’s personalities come through.

Let’s take a look at a few collectors, leaving names aside. We had one client who bought from us for years – the highest quality material. He bought letters of Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson, Churchill, and I could go on. One day he happened to mention his past collection. Naturally curious, we inquired, wanting to know more about what else he might have collected? Perhaps art or automobiles. No. He had amassed a major collection of autographs, then one day decided to sell it to do other things with the money. But less than 5 years had passed when he had begun anew, wishing he had kept his pieces. He had caught the bug and it wouldn’t leave him.

For one collector, it’s a game of sets. He was looking for every president and vice president. Then once he filled those categories – every cabinet member. Then every signer of the declaration of the independence.

For others, it’s a gift of philanthropy. One client, who has partnered with 5 other historical enthusiasts, buys to create exhibits for schools. To my knowledge he has not one piece hanging on his walls. But he has been actively buying since the 80s.

Of course, museums are collectors. As I previously noted, most of the major institutions in this country are built on private donations, either money or documents themselves, or enter the market directly to acquire. Last year, we sold a major collection related to Women's aviation to the Library of Congress. UVA's Albert Small Library is named after one of the great collectors of the 20th century, who is still an active buyer.

Returning the John Brown will, we can see the overlap between the world of collectors and the museum. The folder holding the HSPs will comes also with a note from Walter Benjamin, who was the first great American autograph dealer. The note relates to the purchase of some John Brown related manuscripts, which Benjamin seems to have sold to a collector named Dreer. The Dreer collection was, I presume, donated to HSP later.

The philanthropy field is where the museum and collector most frequently meet face to face, but they meet all the time in less obvious ways. We once had a collection of letters written by the commanding officer who sacked Washington DC and burned the capitol in the War of 1812. But these weren't afterward. They were contemporary accounts of the burning written home to his wife. A collector with superb taste, the same I might add who bought the John Brown will, spotted these and bought them immediately. Over the course of the next week, we had no fewer than three institutions call us to purchase the group. Some day it will either reenter the marketplace or be the subject of some donation. Time will tell.

Thomas Jefferson said, "It is the duty of every good citizen to use all the opportunities which occur to him for preserving documents relating to the history of our country." Jefferson would have been proud of today's collectors and philanthopists, who have taken center stage in the manuscript world. Fully 80% of the holdings of the great displaying institutions in the country are there because people like you have made it possible by donating either funds or the manuscripts themselves. The Library of Congress, the Smithsonian, and the National Constitution Center have relied on private generosity to display important pieces of history. Private collectors have amassed historically significant holdings that keep history front and center, and guarantee that it will be appreciated and preserved. They do their part, as Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote, to "pass unimpaired to those who are to follow us" these great manuscripts. We have been fortunate enough to aid collectors and donors in making their acquisitions, and to be, for a time, the custodian of our nation's heritage. Autograph collecting is a democratic process of historical preservation.