

Dublin Historical Society

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Clio in New England:

Jeremy Belknap and the Origins of Historical Societies in America

by Henry Lee

Although the Pilgrims and Puritans were very conscious of their mission and saw themselves as historic figures, they founded no historical societies or sizable libraries within the first hundred and fifty years of their coming to America. The Harvard College library, containing only about five thousand volumes and few, if any, unpublished materials, was destroyed by fire in 1764. The few collections of unpublished documents and records were private, such as those of Governor Thomas Hutchinson¹ and the Reverend Thomas Prince², each of whom wrote histories based on primary sources.

A young history enthusiast named Jeremy Belknap was much impressed by the works of Hutchinson and Prince, and especially by their reliance on original documents as source material. Born in Boston in 1744, Belknap was baptized by Prince and during his childhood sat under him in the Belknap pew at the

Old South Church. After graduating from Harvard in 1762, Belknap taught school and wrestled with theological doubts. After a conversion experience in 1766, he returned to Harvard to study for the ministry. He was called to the First Parish Church in Dover, New Hampshire, in 1767.

¹ **Thomas Hutchinson** (1711-1780), a native Bostonian who rose to become royal governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, collected historical manuscripts as the basis for his *History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay* (2 vols, Boston, 1764, 1767). He later published some of this material in *A Collection of Original Papers Relative to the History of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay* (Boston, 1769). A large part, however, of his collection of books and papers was destroyed in 1765, when his house was sacked by a mob in the course of the Stamp Act riots.

² **The Rev. Thomas Prince** (1687-1758) was born in Boston and graduated from Harvard in 1707. From 1717 to 1758 he was

minister of the Old South Church, where a young Jeremy Belknap was among his congregation. Prince's main historical work was *A Chronological History of New England* (2 vols, Boston, 1736, 1755), based on his private collection of manuscript documents and the writings of New England clergymen.

Prince left his papers to the Old South Church, where they were shelved in a room in the steeple and were available to researchers like Jeremy Belknap. During the Revolution, however, the Old South was used by British troops as a stable, and many of the documents were lost or destroyed.

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DUES NOTICE



Cards and envelopes for 1996 dues are enclosed. For the tenth year in a row, dues have not increased. Minimum dues, however, barely cover the cost of these newsletters, so the Society depends on extra contributions to support its preservation work. Contributions are tax-deductible.

The "semi-barbarous regions"

At that date about 1,600 people lived in Dover - only about a hundred more than in Dublin today - but it was the fourth largest town in the province. At first Belknap thought he would take to the rustic life. "A quiet and comfortable country life is the greatest temporal happiness that I wish to enjoy." As it turned out, his ministry in Dover, though it lasted for twenty years, was a disaster. He was an uninspiring preacher and, being temperamentally unsuited to doing without intellectual companionship, had little rapport with his rural congregation.

He survived by busying himself with private study, an extensive correspondence, and above all by researching and writing *The History of New Hampshire*, on which he spent twenty-two years. Its three volumes were published in 1784, 1791 and 1792, respectively. (In belated recognition, New Hampshire named Belknap County for him in 1840.)

Having been early impressed with the historical methods of Hutchinson and Prince, Belknap insisted that his *History of New Hampshire* be based on original materials. There were, however, no public libraries or archival repositories, and the private collections of Prince and Hutchinson had been largely dispersed or destroyed. Belknap had therefore to gather his own source documents by all means available: correspondence, circular questionnaires and as much travel as he could afford. This was never as much as he wished, since the expenses of a growing family and endless difficulty in collecting his salary kept him constantly on the edge of destitution. Writing to a Philadelphia friend after his return to Boston, he hoped that his opportunities for travel would now "be more frequent and less embarrassed than while I resided in the semi-barbarous region of the North."



Pot-Luck Supper

Our annual pot-luck supper will be on Friday, February 16, at the Community Church. Our new Trustee John Nelson, an experienced restorer who has renovated Aimée Lamb's house on Main Street, will give an illustrated talk on techniques for restoring and preserving historic houses.

Reminders will be sent out after the first of the year, but please save the date and mark it on your 1996 calendar as soon as you get one.

Back to Boston

In 1786, after nearly twenty years in Dover, Belknap resigned his parish and returned to Boston. In the following year, he was called to the Long Lane Church, forerunner of today's Arlington Street Church, where he remained for the last decade of his life. There he achieved the successful ministry that had eluded him in New Hampshire. Nevertheless, his passion for history continued unabated. His own research, the fate of the collections of Hutchinson and Prince, and a conviction that the Revolutionary War should be documented for posterity, all led Belknap to urge repeatedly the creation of a storehouse of documents, records, books, and historical materials of all kinds. He tried hard to persuade Harvard to set up such a facility, but encountered little enthusiasm.

Then, in 1789, a kindred spirit from New York named John Pintard³ sought out Belknap in Boston to discuss the foundation of an American Antiquarian Society, to be modeled on the Society of Antiquaries in London. In the event, each man started a separate organization in his home city. Pintard's first effort was an American Museum, as an adjunct to the Sons of St. Tammany Society, for "collecting and preserving whatever may relate to the history of our country, and serve to perpetuate the same..." Then Pintard lost his fortune and his brainchild languished. It was not until 1804 that Pintard was able to found the New-York (with a hyphen) Historical Society.

The Massachusetts Historical Society

Acquaintance with Pintard, however, inspired Belknap to work on establishing an antiquarian society in New England. As the result of his efforts, the Massachusetts Historical Society was founded on January 24, 1791, the first historical society in America. The preamble to the Society's constitution noted:

"The preservation of books, pamphlets, manuscripts and records, containing historical

³ John Pintard (1759-1844) was a graduate of Princeton (class of 1776). He seems to have been a somewhat flamboyant character, with a genius for promoting good causes. Among these, besides the Historical Society, were The General Theological Seminary, Sailors' Snug Harbor, and the American Bible Society.

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facts, [and] biographical anecdotes...must always have a useful tendency to rescue the true history of this country from the ravages of time, and the effects of ignorance and neglect."

Membership was by election, and was at first limited to thirty. It was to be a society of the seriously committed. As Belknap wrote to a friend:

"We have now formed our Society; and it is dubbed, not the Antiquarian, but the 'Historical Society.' We intend to be an active, not a passive literary body; not to lie waiting, like a bed of oysters for the tide (of communication) to flow in upon us, but to seek and find, to preserve and communicate literary intelligence, especially in the historical way." [emphasis original]

Belknap followed his own precepts. In addition to all his research materials for the *History of New Hampshire*, he ferreted out and presented to the Society whatever he could find with relevance to American history. In 1783 he wrote, "I am willing to scrape a dunghill to find a jewel at the bottom," and in 1795:

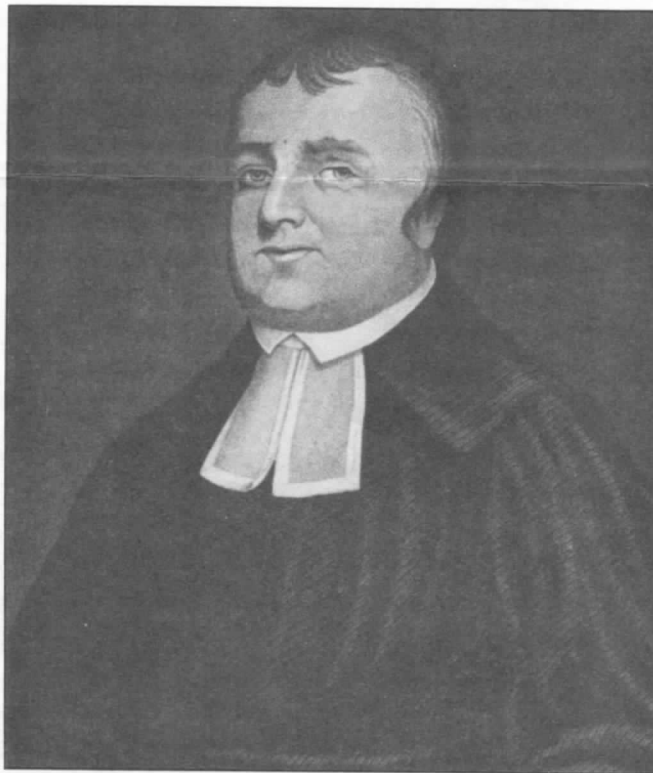
"My last excursion was to Lebanon, in Connecticut, to collect the MSS. and pamphlets of the late Governour Trumbull, which were given to the Historical Society by his heirs;...There is nothing like having a good repository and keeping a good lookout, not waiting at home for things to fall into the lap, but prowling about like a wolf for the prey." [emphasis original]

Other early historical societies

Pintard's New-York Historical Society, founded thirteen years later, was patterned on the Massachusetts Historical Society, but differed in having open membership, while the M.H.S. was limited initially to thirty (later fifty) resident members. The

New York collection was more eclectic and seemed to include everything imaginable, while the M.H.S. concentrated on written materials and art works of pertinence to American history.

The third historical society in America, the American Antiquarian Society, was founded in Worcester in 1812 by Isaiah Thomas.⁴ The Antiquarian Society early acquired many libraries, including that of the Mather family. Today it is a great repository of historical materials, with special stature in its collection of early newspapers.



THE REV. JEREMY BELKNAP

From an engraving in the collection of the New Hampshire Historical Society (N 748).

The next three societies were founded in Maine and Rhode Island in 1822 and New Hampshire in 1823. Others followed, notably in Virginia and Pennsylvania. By 1860, one source recorded 65 historical societies established. Today there are over seven thousand independent societies, as well as state archives, national archives, presidential libraries, and countless specialized societies and sites of a historical nature.

"The true keepers"

All independent historical societies, large or small, are bound in common experience and purpose.

One common thread is poverty. They cannot offer the instant gratification available to museums and symphonies. Their work is for the long term, their value often hidden in the small acknowledgments of popular writers and producers. One of Belknap's first efforts was to obtain from Paul Revere an account of his ride to Lexington. Seventy years later, a member of the Massachusetts Historical

⁴ Isaiah Thomas (1749-1831), a printer and the publisher of the *Massachusetts Spy*, a patriot periodical, had fled Boston upon the British occupation in 1775. In Worcester he prospered as a book publisher, retired in 1802, and devoted the rest of his life to philanthropy.

Society named Longfellow used it to write a poem.

Historical groups have survived, by and large, through the support of a few caring patrons and occasional windfalls, often in the form of bequests from people they scarcely knew and never solicited. Our national history has been preserved still more through the dedication and perseverance of a small body of staff members and volunteers, sometimes a single person. Such people, working for little pay or none at all, are the true keepers of our national heritage. They deserve far more credit and far more support than those of us enriched by their efforts may ever acknowledge.

All historical societies, local or national, are joined as well in common ends, each following as its resources permit Jeremy Belknap's injunction "to seek, find, to preserve and communicate." Preservation requires facilities that can protect documents and papers; communication means to publish

when possible and to make the collection or site available to appropriate users. It is a high responsibility that no society should assume lightly or deviate from in pursuit of extraneous activities. Such repositories are the treasure troves which scholars continually draw upon to study, interpret, and describe our national past in books and now often in TV documentaries. The storehouse that Jeremy Belknap so sorely missed as he worked on his history of New Hampshire is now available to all. It is for us to keep and cherish it.

Henry Lee is President of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

This article was adapted by the author and the editor from a talk given by Henry Lee to the Dublin Historical Society on August 11, 1995. An annotated version, with a bibliography and footnotes, is filed in the Historical Society's archives.

The 1995 Annual Meeting

At the 1995 annual meeting in September, Nancy Handy and John Nelson were elected Trustees. They replace Bill Bauhan, Marney Bean and Dick Friz, who had completed three-year terms. Abe Wolfe was elected a Trustee Emeritus, in recognition of his contributions to the Society as a Trustee, as well as for his role in compiling the National Register nomination and his continuing interest in the preservation of Dublin's historic houses.

Elected as officers were:

President	John Harris
Vice-President	Ann Walsh
Treasurer	Tony Anthony
Secretary	Nancy Handy
Archivist	John Harris
Curator	Marney Bean

News from the Archives

RECENT ACCESSIONS

Several important gifts have come from our Trustee, **Alice Fiske Ellis**, including a number of textbooks used in Dublin's one-room schools and a particularly interesting wall chart made in 1848 to accompany Levi Leonard's *North American Spelling*

Book. She has also given us the invitation sent to her parents by Secretary and Mrs. MacVeagh to the reception for President Taft at "Knollwood" in 1910.

The surviving records of **Emmanuel Church** have been given to the Society, and we are currently organizing these and preparing them for proper storage.

Other welcome gifts have come from **Mary Doyle, Jessie Hale, Henry Lee, Nancy Powell, Joy Putnam, Sturdy Thomas** and **Cynthia Whitney**.

We are particularly grateful to two thoughtful people from out of town who have taken the trouble to send us Dublin-related publications. **Warian Hawkins** of Troy sent us a leather-bound copy of *The Carpenter's New Guide*, Philadelphia, 1818, which belonged to Leonard Snow, a member of the family for whom Snow Hill was named. **Robert S. Burgess** of New London sent a copy of the Confession of Faith of the Dublin Trinitarian Church, printed in 1848, after the split with the Unitarians.

C R E D I T S

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