

LYMAN H. BUTTERFIELD

KEEPING THE PAST IN REPAIR

A distinguished man of letters and the editor of The Adams Papers, Dr. Butterfield presented the following address at the dedication of Rock Ford.

I.

The dedicatory or commemorative address on a patriotic theme is the oldest way we have of celebrating our past, and for reasons not altogether easy to understand, the most popular. If, as someone once said, all the speakers on all such occasions were laid end to end — as no doubt they should be — one shudders to think how many times they would go around the boundaries of the United States. No doubt the best way of dealing with them when they get to their feet is that of an elderly gentleman at the celebration in 1857 of the 250th anniversary of the landing of the first settlers at Jamestown, Virginia, when ex-President John Tyler was the orator of the day. Old Judge Clopton after a hot walk through rough fields arrived with his son near the place where Tyler was delivering his two-and-a-half hour review of the glories of Virginia's history. Clopton, exhausted, repeatedly asked his son to take him "to the stand."

"Father," said his son, "we are at the stand where President Tyler is speaking." "Oh," said the Judge, "I don't want to hear John Tyler now, take me to the stand where the mint julep is."¹

The origin of the patriotic address as an American folk ritual can be dated precisely. It began with the first annual Boston Massacre oration in 1771 — a device conceived in the fertile brain of Sam Adams for strictly propagandist purposes and continued until the close of the Revolution. It was then converted to the Fourth of July address, which, with its familiar accompaniments of parades of local dignitaries, fireworks, family picnics, and the like, is remembered by many of us, but has largely disappeared, in part a victim of developments I shall mention later.

The Fourth of July celebration in its full-blown 19th-century form was a marvelous affair. Through the first quarter of the century these festivals were conducted on strictly partisan lines. The Federalists, who had appropriated George Washington as their patron saint, held their own separate celebrations, and the Jeffersonians, or Republicans, held theirs. Their respective orators denounced the other party's principles and acts, and if the marching bodies encountered each other at a turn in the street there were bound to be cracked heads and bloody noses — the inevitable result, as Professor Craven has remarked, of indiscreetly mixing "gunpowder, liquor, and patriotism."²

But a change came with the jubilee of American independence in 1826. On that Fourth of July two Presidents died, Thomas Jefferson in Virginia and John Adams in Massachusetts. These two founding fathers had at first collaborated and then contended in public life, but in retirement they had risen above partisanship and become once again admiring friends and copious correspondents. The country poured out its grief for both alike in unison, concluded that their simultaneous deaths on the anniversary day must have been a sign of divine favor to the United States, and the Fourth of July became a truly national festival, a kind of American saints' day.

Other events and forces contributed to the new, almost religious nationalism of the 1820's and 1830's. Among them were the American naval and land victories in the War of 1812, and the peace that followed this "second war of independence" and cleared the way to continental expansion. There was also the visit of General Lafayette to the country he had helped liberate a half-century earlier. Lafayette toured the whole union, was received with almost hysterical enthusiasm in cities and hamlets, and reminded Americans, by his very presence that they **had** their freedom while Europe from Russia to Spain lay under the heels of ancient or restored monarchy. The bicentennial anniversary of the landing at Plymouth Rock occurred in 1820, and that of the settlement of the Massachusetts Bay colony ten years later.

Such events naturally called for celebration, and a whole school of orators arose to meet the demand. Chief among them were Daniél Webster and Edward Everett. Of the first it has been aptly said that no man could possibly be so great as Daniel Webster looked. The second made

virtually a career of patriotic oratory. Between 1820 and 1860 no public occasion, whether a cornerstone was to be laid, a ship launched, a dignitary welcomed, a charitable institution founded, or even a prize to be given at a cattle show, was quite up to standard unless Mr. Everett gave the address. His collected **Orations and Speeches** for those years fill four volumes running to seven or eight hundred pages apiece and I suspect are seldom consulted, though there is no better guide to the taste of the age. In the preface to this mammoth collection Everett himself admitted that his earlier efforts were marked by "overstrained sentiment," or what we call florid and long-winded rhetoric. But he defended them on the ground that, in contrast with European countries, the "heroic past" of America was recent, "prolonged even into the present time" by the survival of Revolutionary leaders. We could and did, he said, "behold some of the bold barons of our Runnymede face to face."³

Writing thus in 1850, Everett thought he saw a decline in what he called "comprehensive patriotism" among his countrymen. He was of course right, for the struggle over slavery had by then driven a deep wedge into the nation. But the war itself renewed the old, semi-religious sentiments of union, and a climax in patriotic celebrations was attained in the famous dedication of the National Cemetery at Gettysburg in November 1863. Here took place Everett's last great oratorical effort, and a very ambitious one it was. Readers of Carl Sandburg's great chapter on Lincoln's Gettysburg Address will remember that Everett wrote the President on the following day: "I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes." This brief but splendid tribute was matched only by the grace of Lincoln's reply: "In our respective parts yesterday," he told Everett, "you could not have been excused to make a short address, nor I a long one. I am pleased to know that, in your judgment, the little I did say was not entirely a failure."⁴

II.

But a speaker's words, unless they are as telling as Lincoln's, are soon forgotten. Even if set in type, as they usually were in the 19th century, they are put away on library shelves and as the years pass on are seldom consulted. Once the founding fathers themselves had disappeared, some more durable means of commemorating their actions than spoken eulogies was sought for.

What may be called the monumental era in the history of American patriotism also had its origin in Massachusetts. Though the question has been argued for two centuries, there is still no agreement that the passengers in the **Mayflower** actually stepped ashore on Plymouth Rock. But local tradition had sanctified that misshapen piece of granite some years before the Revolution, and in 1774 the Plymouth Sons of Liberty tried to move it to the center of town for use as a base for a liberty pole. With all their oxen, ropes, and other gear, they succeeded in getting only a piece of it. To the mortification of citizens and visitors, Forefathers' Rock re-

mained split in two pieces for over a hundred years until united again and protected from vandals in 1880.

The earliest architectural monument to an historic event was planned, naturally enough, when the half-century anniversary of the first major battle of the Revolution approached. At the laying of the cornerstone for Bunker Hill Monument in Charlestown, Lafayette was present and Daniel Webster stunned thousands of onlookers with his magnificent presence and rolling periods. Difficulties still lay ahead, for eminent citizens and architects disagreed about the design, and the voluntary fund-raising efforts bogged down for long periods. They went over the top, interestingly and prophetically, as the result of a mammoth Ladies' Fair in 1840 which raised \$30,000. At last, in June 1843, the great obelisk was dedicated, the speaker, as you may have guessed, being Daniel Webster.

The effort to erect a memorial in masonry to the Father of his Country had an even longer and more troubled history. The Washington National Monument Society was formed in 1832, the centennial year of the first President's birth, but only after sixteen years of campaigning for funds was it possible to lay the cornerstone on land granted by the government. Contributions were received in kind as well as in cash. For example, Pope Pius IX sent a block of marble from the Temple of Concord in Rome, and I am sorry to say that anti-Catholic vandals stole it, broke it up, and dropped the pieces in the Potomac. This religious-political incident set back the whole campaign, so that when the Civil War broke out the monument was only one-third completed. It languished in that condition until the centennial of independence in 1876, when Congress appropriated funds to complete it. Not until 1888 was the great structure, at the time the tallest built by man, opened to the public.

It hardly needs to be said that these products of patriotic zeal and engineering skill are today best seen from a distance. I doubt if any more like them will ever be raised. The monument-building impulse has of course by no means died out in our time. In fact a writer in the **New York Times Magazine** within the last few weeks expressed concern lest the City of Washington become "an unplanned cemetery," so fashionable has the vogue become of erecting statues, carillons, and all manner of indestructible memorials to the great and not so great in the national capital.⁵ Though we should stay watchful and should certainly snuff out any such ventures as the 24-million dollar "Freedom Shrine" recently under consideration by Congress, I think we need not be too alarmed. The impulse to resort to masonry for patriotic purposes has been steadily giving way to a very different mode of memorializing our forefathers — historic preservation and restoration. If a Bunker Hill Association were to be formed today, its very first objective would be to level the obelisk and construct breastworks from earth and simulated old fence rails.

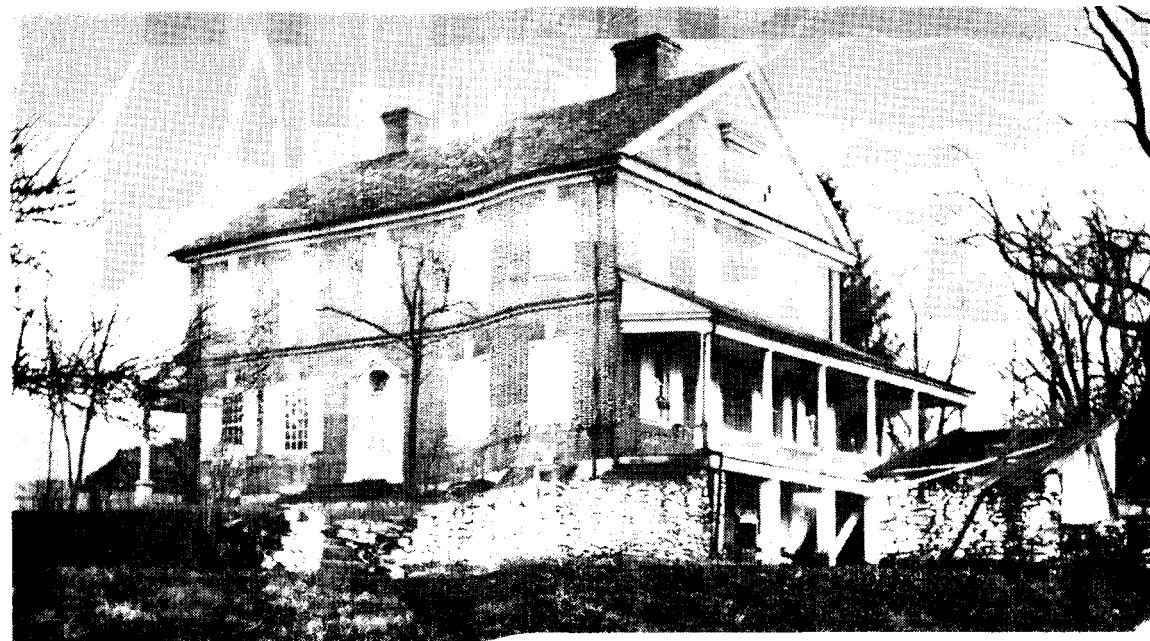
III.

The first important venture in historic preservation occurred in Virginia. The rescue of Mount Vernon plantation from its neglected state was a woman's idea and anticipated many such enterprises that have followed by being the result of feminine enthusiasm and energy. To be sure, the originator, Miss Ann Pamela Cunningham of Charleston, so shrank from publicity or anything that might associate her with dreadful things like women's rights or abolitionism that she signed her appeals "A Southern Matron," and she is said to have nearly fainted when she first saw her name printed in a newspaper. But she organized an effective national group, the Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union, in 1856, which five years later purchased the site and began putting it into repair through proceeds from tourist admissions.⁶ (Edward Everett's oration on "The Character of Washington," repeated before huge audiences in nearly every state of the Union over several years, brought \$70,000 to the purchase fund.)

From this prototype have sprung, mostly within the past three or four decades, the hundreds of "historic house museums" that now dot the land. The restored house under the care of a voluntary local association

Rock Ford as it appeared in the mid-1880's. Notice the porches.

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is a usually modest and generally satisfactory way to preserve physical survivals from the past that would otherwise fall victim to the realty speculator and the bulldozer. Lancaster was fairly early in the field with the acquisition and careful restoration of Wheatland and its grounds by the Junior League. James Buchanan was not one of our greatest Presidents, but it is not necessarily eminence that commends preservation, but representativeness.

It is good to see Rock Ford, the home of Brigadier and Adjutant General Edward Hand, join the company of architectural survivals that will not be obliterated. Hand's career was splendidly representative of his era. Irish-born and trained in medicine, he came to the Pennsylvania frontier as a surgeon in a royal regiment a few years before the Revolution, purchased a commission, and later found his way to the inland metropolis of Lancaster to practice medicine. He seems to have had no difficulty whatever in moving at once into the best company the region provided. Early in 1775 he married a niece of Jasper Yeates, a prominent lawyer and landholder, and soon afterward joined the Continental Army. His promotions were rapid for so young a man, and he fought through the war. He was esteemed by Washington and others for his knowledge of frontier geography and methods of fighting and for his efficiency in the exacting tasks assigned him as adjutant general. Hand returned to Lancaster when the army was disbanded in 1784 and bought 160 acres on Conestoga Creek, near enough to the busy town for convenience but far enough away for rural detachment and patriarchal dignity. He undoubtedly built this house soon afterward and here raised his eight children on a well-stocked farm while he continued a medical practice that was described by Yeates as "handsome." He was now a full-fledged member of the provincial aristocracy; his children connected him through their marriages with other members of it; he became a vestryman in St. James' Church, a participant in civic and business enterprises, and the holder of sundry political offices, including a term as delegate to the Continental Congress.

As a town burgess in 1789 Hand addressed an extraordinary circular letter to the members of the new United States House and Senate detailing Lancaster's claims for consideration as the seat of the national government. It tells so much about Hand and so much about Lancaster in 1789 that I am sorry I cannot read it in full, but it is readily available in print. "As an Inland Town," Hand said, speaking for the burgesses collectively, "we do not perceive ourselves inferior to any within the Dominion of the United States." For example, "Our Lands are remarkably fertile & in a high state of Cultivation." Good water and building materials are plentiful. "We venture to assert that there is no Part of the United States which can boast within the Compass of ten Miles, the same Number of Waggon & good Teams as ourselves." (This may still, or again, be true!) Other persuasive points included Lancaster's "Central Situation," its "elegant Court House 58 Feet by 48 feet," "seven Places of Public Worship besides a Temporary Synagogue," "Lodgings . . . to be had



A front view of Rock Ford as it appeared in the autumn of 1960.

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at very easy Rates," "Labour . . . to be had at the Rate of 2 1/2 shillings p[er] Day," plentiful shad and salmon in the Susquehanna nearby, hickory and oak firewood available at from 12/6 to 8/6 per cord, "3 Printing Presses & 40 Houses of public Entertainment within the Borough" — thus satisfying every intellectual and bodily need.⁷

It was a good pitch but was unsuccessful. Hand continued his comfortable life at Rock Ford as paterfamilias, farmer, physician, federal inspector of customs, a genial host, and a solid citizen. His unexpected death in 1802 at the age of 57 "plunged us all," said his friend Yeates, "into the greatest affliction." His "elegant mansion house" (as a sale notice called it)—among his barns and other outbuildings, his orchards and fields — matched his political views, which were unswervingly Federalist. The rescue of Rock Ford from neglect and possibly total loss is a highly commendable action and deserves our warmest thanks and congratulations.

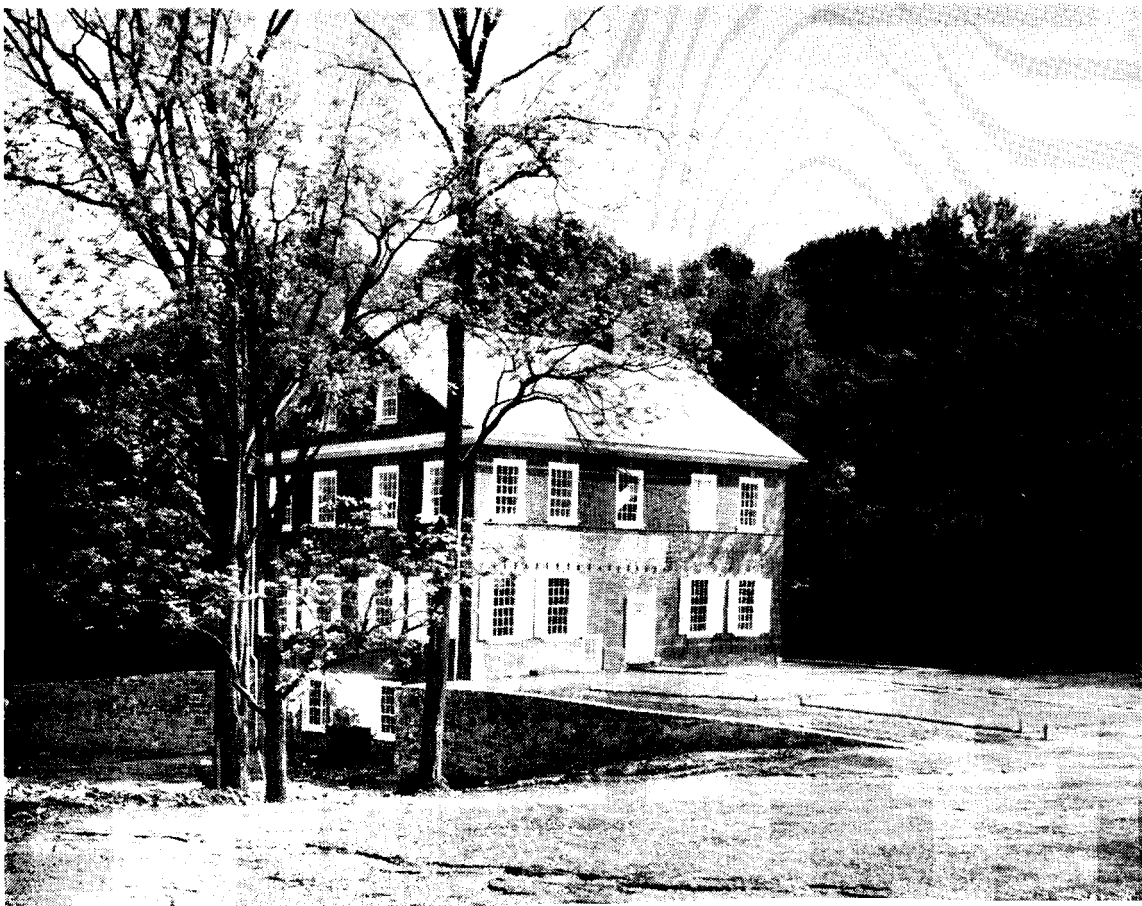
IV.

The preservation of an individual historic house is a very modest undertaking compared with the great enterprises in historical restoration that have sprung up in the United States since the 1920's and continue to increase in both number and scale annually. They have become a fashion, a fad, almost a mania.

The names of many of them are now household words: Greenfield Village at Dearborn, Fort Ticonderoga, Williamsburg, Old Deerfield, the Wayside Inn, Old Sturbridge Village, the Farmers' Museum at Coopers-town, Sleepy Hollow, Plimoth Plantation. City, state, and federal governments are all heavily involved. All three, for example, are sharing in the multi-million dollar Old Philadelphia project centering on Independence Hall — though in 1816 Independence Square and Hall very nearly passed into private hands and oblivion. The vogue has produced ships and even whole seaports in replica, rebuilt log cabins, forts, churches, missions, iron foundries, powder and grist mills; it has cleared battlefields and plantations; and there is serious talk of restoring a section of the Erie

A rear view of Rock Ford as it appeared in the autumn of 1960.

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The restored dining room of Rock Ford. Mrs. John Holden is seated on the left and Mrs. Walter M. Dunlap, Jr. is on the right.

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Canal, complete with locks, so that we shall be able to ride in reconstructed canal boats drawn by presumably unreconstructed mules.

The sources of all this activity are not far to seek. Increased income and leisure have made us the most nomadic people on earth. Thanks to the motor car, the historic site has reversed the principle on which museums long operated: instead of collecting materials from many places for exhibition in one place, the museum is now the site itself, and the customers can be counted on to get there if it is worth seeing. I have heard the situation summed up in a sentence from the Book of Daniel: "Many run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased."

The combination of entertainment and uplift, of the relaxed mood of tourism and the satisfaction of learning about the American past, is a powerful one and has paid off. In short, historic preservation and restoration have become big business. A whole new profession of curators, specialists in archeology, architectural history, and decorative arts, has sprung up, and administrators, not to mention public relations experts, have multiplied strictly in accord with Parkinson's Law. The largest and best-

known of all the great restoration projects, Colonial Williamsburg, has expended over \$50,000,000 in capital funds to teach Americans about life in early Virginia; it enjoys an endowment of over \$40,000,000 and a gross annual income of over \$10,000,000. How many universities can command sums like these in carrying on their work of teaching and research? None of the great historical societies or libraries which hold the sources essential to the advancement of historical knowledge have anything remotely comparable in the way of funds, and they do not charge admission. Popular history pays.

The impact of such large expenditures for what the professionals call "three-dimensional history" has of course been great. If schoolboys no longer memorize Patrick Henry's "If this be treason" speech of 1765 (no doubt a good thing, since it is partly a fabrication), they can stand on the spot where he presumably made it, in the Chamber of the House of Burgesses in the reconstructed colonial Capitol of Virginia, and under effective "interpretation" by trained guides they can catch some notion of the solemnity of the scene and the weight of the issues. At Winterthur we can travel through scores if not hundreds of representative rooms from all parts of early America, so superlatively furnished that the illusion of visiting the past is almost complete. At Saugus we can see a colonial iron furnace in action; at Cooperstown we can watch textiles being made by domestic methods. At Yorktown, Fort McHenry, and Antietam, we can visualize land and naval actions that we could not possibly fully grasp from printed narratives and maps alone. At Quincy, Massachusetts, in the house where five generations of Adamses lived and where they left their books and furniture and china in a bewildering but fascinating clutter, we can enter into their lives as we could by no other means.

These and scores of other sites like them "constitute," as Julian P. Boyd has said, "a vast textbook across the land, wherein millions of people may deepen their experience, renew their acquaintance with the roots of their institutions, and occasionally encounter those rare moments of understanding that regenerate our strength."⁸

This, of course, is the highest objective of those directing historic sites and restorations. That objective is most likely to be achieved when solid and prolonged scholarly effort have gone into the reconstruction and interpretation. This is the point, in other words, where scholarship pays off. The best of these great enterprises recognize their obligation to plow back into continuing research a substantial part of the gate receipts. Colonial Williamsburg, for example, maintains a large staff of research experts and conducts a distinguished publication program in its immediate field of interest. By its generous support of the Institute of Early American History and Culture it also channels a good many tourist dollars into the advancement of historical knowledge on a much wider salient. The most enlightened program of this kind that I know of is that of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, which owns Monticello and conducts it as a public memorial to the great Virginian. The **Report** of its curator for 1959 is a remarkable document. This booklet spends little time on



Mrs. John Holden and Mrs. Walter M. Dunlap, Jr., members of the Board of Trustees and Executive Committee of the Rock Ford Foundation, examine the stair hall in Rock Ford.

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the number of its visitors (though there were some 235,000 in 1959) and on the celebrities among them. Rather, it concentrates on the research being done with the Foundation's support on Jefferson's house, his library, the paintings he owned and the portraits painted of him. Besides all this it lists grants for a Jefferson professorship and for graduate fellowships at the University of Virginia as well as for the purchase of Jefferson manuscripts by the library of the University.

One cannot help feeling that Jefferson himself, who declared that "the earth belongs in usufruct to the living" rather than to the dead,⁹ would have warmly approved. Here is responsible custodianship indeed.

But the seductions of success and bigness are powerful; and it is also easy to confuse education with entertainment. Historic preservation having become big business, it has tended to adopt attitudes more suited to Hollywood and Madison Avenue than to the world of learning. The films, the booklets, and the guides tell us many quaint and dramatic things, throwing over the whole scene a rosy glow of romance and derring-do. We do not learn in Williamsburg, for example, that Patrick Henry and Thomas

Jefferson, who by now of course are American folk heroes who could do nothing wrong, were locked in a long, grim struggle with each other over the disestablishment of the Anglican Church. Nor as we stroll through the clipped gardens and superbly furnished rooms are we made aware that here was a whole economy, a whole culture, that "rested," as Professor Craven has said, "on the back of a Negro."¹⁰

These are serious deficiencies. Possibly they are inherent in "three-dimensional" or "costume" history. Like most historical films and the general run of historical fiction, such history tends to lull our critical faculties and to present only parts of the past — the quaint and dramatic parts — as if they were the whole.

My plea here is that we keep things in perspective. That we do not confuse mere spectatorship with knowledge. That reenacting John Brown's raid or the battle of Bull Run is a somewhat childish way of paying tribute to our forebears and is not likely to be very educational for anyone concerned. That in contemplating our past, as Walter M. Whitehill has pointed out recently with great persuasiveness, we need less "celebration" and more "cerebration."¹¹ That learning how Greatgrandma made candles or cookies and put down sausage meat for the winter is an innocent diversion, but that we must not suppose that either Greatgrandma's house-keeping skills or Greatgrandpap's ideas will save the republic in the second half of the 20th century.

This is by no means to disparage the uses of history. It is simply to distinguish between its use and abuse. I would not forego the pleasures of popular history. I would only be careful not to mistake it for the whole truth. The truth about our past is less easily arrived at and, when found, is likely to be less entertaining, tidy, and suited to our preconceived notions than popular interpreters, whether in films, novels, or historic restorations, would, for the most part, have us suppose.

Boston, Mass.

LYMAN H. BUTTERFIELD

NOTES

1. Ralph H. Rives, "The Jamestown Celebration of 1857," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, LXVI (1958), 269.
2. Wesley Frank Craven, *The Legend of the Founding Fathers*, New York, 1956, p. 88.
3. Edward Everett, *Orations and Speeches on Various Occasions*, Boston, 1860-1868, I, x.
4. Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, New York, 1939, II, 475.
5. Alvin Shuster, "Lest Washington Be 'An Unplanned Cemetery,'" *New York Times Magazine*, September 11, 1960.
6. Wallace E. Davies, *Patriotism on Parade: The Story of Veterans' and Hereditary Organizations in America, 1783-1900*, Cambridge, 1955, pp. 24-27.

7. **Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography**, XL (1916) 358-361. After the present speech was delivered, Mrs. W. Nelson Francis of Lancaster, who has done much of the documentary research for the restoration of Rock Ford, kindly furnished me with a transcript of a letter written at Lancaster by Jasper Yeates to James Hamilton, March 18, 1789, in which Yeates stated that, as a member of the burgesses' committee appointed for the purpose, he himself had drafted the letter quoted and summarized above, which is dated March 17, 1789. (The originals of both letters are in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.) I have let the passage stand as it was read at the dedication exercises at Rock Ford, but I am glad to make the necessary correction here. The letter that Hand signed expresses his views, though drafted by his friend and patron Yeates.

8. "The Uncherished Past," Wyoming Commemorative Association, **Proceedings**, Wilkes-Barre, 1958, p. 8.

9. Letter to James Madison, September 6, 1789, **The Papers of Thomas Jefferson**, ed. Julian P. Boyd and others, Princeton, 1950-, XV, 392.

10. **The Legend of the Founding Fathers**, p. 182.

11. "Cerebration Versus Celebration," **Virginia Magazine of History and Biography**, LXVIII (1960), 259-270.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Lyman H. Butterfield is editor-in-chief of **THE ADAMS PAPERS**, an edition of the papers of the Adams Family sponsored by the Massachusetts Historical Society and published by the Belknap Press of Harvard University.