

John W. Aungst, Jr.: **A Eulogy**

by Whitfield Bell, Ph.D.

Citizenship comes in many garbs. Mostly the term suggests senators, unpaid members of public commissions, fund-raising for the Red Cross, Boy Scouts, or local fire companies. Our friend's good citizenship was of another sort. If in Lancaster County today there is a keener awareness of the local heritage, of how knowledge of the past can enrich our own lives today and the life of our communities in years to come, it is owing not a little to John Aungst's work during the past 30 years.

He was closely connected with two institutions — the Lancaster County Historical Society, of which he was in succession treasurer, administrator, and director; and the Historic Preservation Trust of Lancaster, of which he was a founder and the second president. In both these organizations, in addition to the ordinary duties of administration and advocacy, he awakened, encouraged, and guided an informed concern for records, artifacts, and buildings surviving from earlier times, as well as for their obligations and opportunities. He brought to this achievement qualities of mind and personality, and roots deep in the county's soil and history, that were singularly effective. He may indeed have been one of the last, as he was certainly one of the best, non-professional, non-professorial advocates of grass-roots history.

He did not limit his attention to the Historical Society and the Heritage Foundation, but extended his interest and support to a dozen others — among them the Mount Joy Area Historical Society, the Manheim

Historical Society, the Ephrata Cloister Association, the Donegal Society, the Fulton Opera House Association, the Landis Valley Museum, the James Buchanan Foundation, the Edward Hand Medical Heritage Foundation. Only last fall he took a lead in establishing Landisville's Old Main Street Historical Society on the basis of Amos Herr's slide collection. Organized in his living room in October, it now has 110 members and a treasury of \$1,900. Fittingly, membership certificate No. 1 was issued to John and Peg Aungst. John was thus acquainted personally as a fellow-member with each of these groups: to each in varying degrees and amounts he freely gave time, effort, knowledge and money. He served as a sort of one-man historical network who, more than anyone else, linked one society with another, thereby enabling each to strengthen its cause with support from the rest.

He took particular interest and pride in the preservation of the Andrew Ellicott house. Unless you worked with him in that undertaking, you had to learn from others what part he had taken. When the building was threatened with destruction, John and some others formed the Historic Preservation Trust to save it. Preservation was not then a popular cause, its nature and purpose not widely understood; some regarded it as sentimentality, others as anti-business and hostile to the rights of private property. The financial, legal, public relation, and personal problems were daunting. At best members of the Trust were few and their funds insufficient. John and some others signed personal notes to cover the purchase price of the building. Eventually, the Trust succeeded — John taking a lead in this transition — in reorganizing and enlarging its base of support and extending its objective beyond the Ellicott house into the city and county.

Three things, I believe, account for such successes. In the first place, John was knowledgeable in the history of Lancaster and its environs. During more than 40 years of intelligent collecting, he had assembled a valuable reference library — and he knew what was in the books. Friends might count it a small triumph if they could bring up a Lancaster County event or person John could not tell something about, or call his attention to some book that John did not own or know.

Eventually the books overflowed the shelves and cases he built for them; they filled closets, the attic, the garage [what space was not taken by his collection of classic cars], and even mounted the stairway step by step. Before long they required space in the house next door, which, fortunately, he owned. But John was no mere compulsive acquirer: his books, like everything else about him, were carefully organized, each had its appointed place, and for each he carefully recorded when it was acquired, from whom, and at what price.

In addition to knowledge, John brought to his tasks and achievements as a historian, the personal heritage of a native of this place. He lived for

many years in the house his grandfather built and died in the room in which he was born. The many personal ties he thus had with other old inhabitants were a source of strength and influence, the guarantee of a sympathetic hearing. I never heard him speak of ancestors or relations, but he knew people everywhere in the county and, in his company when we met an old resident, I was struck by the ease and speed with which they found their common base.

To expert knowledge and shared heritage were added education and experience, an outgoing manner that made him at ease and welcome in any company, and a devotion to the task at hand untroubled by any concern as to who might get the credit. A wide circle of friends and correspondents included, among others, a prominent Philadelphia collector, New York and Boston booksellers, the State Historian, the chief architect of Independence National Historical Park, and a good many historians, like the recent biographer of Robert Fulton, who wrote about — or merely mentioned — Lancaster or Lancaster figures in their books.

To all who shared his interests, especially to any inquirer, whether a junior high school student writing his first term paper or a famous scholar, John was accessible, helpful, encouraging. His enthusiastic appreciation of any discovery in local history — his own or another's — was infectious and rewarding.

As a historical administrator, a pioneering preservationist, the friend and aide of history and historians, as a citizen, John enriched the communities to which he belonged — Landisville, Lancaster County, the wider world beyond. We shall miss his presence, but, whether recognizing it or not, will always walk in the light of his influence and example.