

Lancaster County's Literary Tastes Of The Eighteenth And Early Nineteenth Centuries

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Modern historians have focused much of their attention on intellectual history, that is to say, what did our progenitors think about, what influenced their thoughts, and how did they respond to such influences. Another way to look at this is to reexamine material culture—the artifacts of our heritage—and attempt to determine how that material culture was affected by the cerebration of our ancestors. That answer seems almost obvious: virtually everything was influenced deliberately, consciously, by forethought. Certainly what one reads has a significant bearing on one's perception of the world and of its nature. The quality and quantity of what one reads, and the frequency of literary exercise, are major factors in how one thinks, and determines the breadth of one's knowledge.

Generally professional historians concern themselves with national or regional intellectual history—if they deign to explore intellectual history at all. It is my purpose to look at a minor, albeit important factor in the development of local intellectual history, and I propose to accomplish this by examining the literature available to Lancaster Countians 125 to 250 years ago.

Lancaster County's antecedent was Chester County, one of Penn's original three counties. The first permanent community located in what was to become Lancaster County was settled in 1710. From 1710 until 1729 when Lancaster County was erected out of the backwoods of Chester County, vast numbers of settlers from the Rhineland, Scotland, Ulster, Wales, and England came here to carve farms and villages out of the unfriendly wilderness. Seventy-five percent of the settlers were Germanic, i.e., they were from the German Rhineland or the German-speaking cantons of Switzerland. Most were farmers with

sufficient skills in trades such as blacksmithing, weaving, cabinetmaking, and grainmilling. Many Scots whose families had sojourned for a generation or two in Northern Ireland settled in the western and southern parts of Lancaster County. Most of the Scots eventually moved westward across the Susquehanna River to the middle and western parts of Pennsylvania. They left in their wake a heritage of learning that continued to influence most powerfully those Scots who remained here. Their insistence upon an educated clergy brought university-trained leaders and teachers into their communities. An illiterate Scot was an intolerable abomination! The English and Welsh settlers were either Anglican (Church of England) or Quaker, and both groups valued education and freedom of expression. Literacy was high among the English and Welsh. Along with literacy a strong sense of criticism and skepticism existed. An amusing example of early wit may be found in the Bangor Episcopal churchyard at Churchtown in Caernarvon Township. Cyrus Lomas was the village atheist. Despite his disbelief, Lomas desired to be buried in the Bangor church cemetery, and managed to persuade the church authorities to allow his remains to be interred therein. Once permission had been granted, Lomas had a tombstone made for eventual placement over his remains. When completed the tombstone proclaimed:

CYRUS LOMAS

Born January 6th [1817]
 year of Independence forty first
 Died May 26 1898
 As nature is the only God
 That I can know or see
 It teaches me this earth's my home
 During Eternity

The good people of the Bangor Church were horrified and refused to allow the stone to be erected over the Lomas grave until the offensive epitaph was removed. While waiting for the stone to be expunged, another literary townsman added this thought:

Cyrus Lomas is dead and here he lies
 Nobody laughs and nobody cries
 And where he has gone and how he fares
 Nobody knows and nobody cares

Searching for tombstones as a source for literary accomplishment rarely is productive. Better sources are books offered for sale by local booksellers, inventories of libraries of estates, library catalogues of local libraries, and

literary contributions to local newspapers.

One of Lancaster's earliest booksellers was Patrick Orr, who died in 1754, just 12 years after Lancaster was chartered as a borough. His entire stock of books was inventoried for appraisal, which provides an idea of what the local people were reading.

As might be expected, Orr's inventory included three Bibles and a large assortment of religious works such as Willison's *Sacramental Catechism*, psalters, Smalridge's *Art of Preaching*, and Abernathy's *Sermons on Various Subjects*. It is illuminating to know the mid-eighteenth century ministers were not always prepared to whip up a sermon and deliver all two hours of it with a divinely-inspired spontaneity! Descriptions of travel and gazetteers appeared to be popular works in the early inventory. Lancaster wit and humor surely was tickled by reading Jean Baptiste Morvan de Belle-Garde's *Reflections Upon Ridicule, or, What it is That Makes a Man Ridiculous and the Means to Avoid it*. This rib-tickler was published in London in 1706, and was stocked on Mr. Orr's shelves in 1755. A newer work offered by Orr was Tobias George Smollett's *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle, In Which Are Included, Memoirs of a Lady of Quality*, published in 1751. Naturally, that old classic, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, was stocked in several editions. Fielding's *History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*, also was available to Lancastrians in various editions. The teenagers of Old Lancaster could find enjoyment and instruction—probably more of the latter than the former—in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded, in a Series of Familiar Letters From a Beautiful Young Damsel to Her Parents*, 1741 edition. Henry Brooke's *A New Collection of Fairy Tales*, 1750 edition, doubtless was a delight to the young fry. *The Spectator*, by Addison, Steele, and others, in various editions and volumes, certainly put the edge on the literary talents of Lancaster's well-bred and well-read residents. For the young apprentice clerk in the counting house there was George Fisher's *Arithmetick in the Plainest and Most Concise Methods Hither Extant, With New Improvements for Dispatch of Business in all the Several Rules, As Also Fractions Vulgar and Decimal*. This 1748 edition was the "New Math" of the eighteenth century. If this little gem proved too advanced for apprentice and master, there was John Mair's *Book-Keeping Methods; Or, A Methodical Treatise of Merchant Accounts*, 1741 edition. Bookseller Orr kept a good stock of *Robinson Crusoe*, always a favorite, on hand.

An analysis of Patrick Orr's inventory by Allan Tully reveals five categories of books. Forty-seven percent of the inventory was in belles-lettres; 35% in religious works; 11% in practical skills and proper conduct; 4% in history, geography, and travel; and 2% miscellaneous. The absence of works on political science, political economy, and government have puzzled historians who were educated to believe nearly everyone who could read devoured works by John Locke and Adam Smith, but that supposition disregards the fact that Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was not published until 1776, and the literature

of revolutionary ferment had not appeared in the Colonies in the 1750s—an era when the American colonists were still content to have Mother England protecting them.

Establishment of the Lancaster Library Company in 1759 resulted in the creation of the third subscription library outside of Philadelphia in Pennsylvania. The other two were at Hatboro and Darby, close to Philadelphia. It was closely associated with the borough government, the burgesses and library board members being the same. The first librarian was Samuel Magaw. Books were to be kept out not longer than one week. By 1763 the library was functioning under the name of Juliana Library Company, and Lt. Gov. James Hamilton, whom we recognize as the founder of Lancaster, signed the articles of incorporation. When John Penn came to Pennsylvania in December 1763, the Secretary of the Library Company extolled the virtues of libraries by stating, "Knowledge and Literature are the natural fruits of Liberty and have been patronized and cherished in every free and well-regulated Community." The name Juliana, you will recognize, honored Juliana Penn, the wife of William Penn, Jr. The seal of the Juliana Library depicted Minerva leading an illiterate person with one hand and pointing with the other hand to a shelf of books and a pair of globes. The Penns contributed a large number of books to the library. The act of incorporation became null and void with the declaration of independence from Great Britain, and in 1783 the library was reincorporated. Through several reorganizations this historic library is now the Lancaster County Library. By this time the library had grown extensively, and its catalogue now included numerous works on political science and economy, classic writings on government, histories of nations, and works we can describe as polemics favoring patriotism and freedom. Interesting but not surprising are the works on Deism and natural theology. No late twentieth century censorship from the right wing in late eighteenth century Lancaster! The catalogue of the Juliana Library represented an excellent selection of works covering every category from fiction to practical arts, from belles-lettres to history, and mathematics and science. It is evident the selections were made carefully and with much intellectual consideration. We may suppose also that the selections were made with a view towards what Lancastrians wanted to read and what they ought to be reading.

This essay does not include local specialized libraries such as the Jasper Yeates's law library, a collection of over 1,000 law treatises, reports, and texts. This library was assembled reportedly following the break with Great Britain in order to ascertain which statutes then current should be incorporated into Pennsylvania statutes. This library, now at the Lancaster County Historical Society, is considered the fourth most important library of its kind in the nation.

Lancaster Countians not only have been readers; they have been authors. The first history of the American Revolution was written by Dr. David Ramsey, a native of Drumore Township in Lancaster County. He was born in 1749,

and graduated from Princeton University and Philadelphia Medical College. Later he served in the Continental Congress. Ramsey was the first person to obtain a copyright in the United States. Lancaster's prolific early printer, Francis Bailey, a native of Sadsbury Township, did much to keep booksellers' shelves filled with works of every variety in the eighteenth century.

Two early poets were Sallie Hastings and Benjamin G. Herr of Lancaster County. Mrs. Hastings was born in Donegal Township. Despite little formal education, she read whatever she could find, and especially the classics which she read and reread. In 1808, when she was 35 years old, she published her collected poems under the title, *Poems on Different Subjects and a Descriptive Account of a Family Tour to the West in 1800*. Early authors delighted in formulating lengthy titles in the days before book jackets presented blurbs and synopses of the contents.

Benjamin G. Herr was born in Strasburg Township in 1808. Despite his lack of much formal education, through extensive reading, especially of the classics, Herr was able to serve three terms in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, where he was regarded as a competent legislator. From 1848 to 1878 Herr experienced his greatest literary output, with 22 volumes of poetry to his credit.

Another local author was Dr. Samuel S. Haldeman, a literary "Renaissance Man," whose writings on natural science and linguistics earned him scholarly recognition around the world. He was the author of more than 150 scholarly monographs, all but 30 being on natural science, including zoology, entomology, and geology. The remainder were on languages. For many years Dr. Haldeman taught at the University of Pennsylvania. He was of the famed Haldeman family of ironmasters at Marietta.

Lloyd Mifflin has been the recipient of the title, "America's Greatest Sonneteer." The Columbian fits more into the last half of the nineteenth century, but his origins are earlier. Whether or not his sonnets measure up to world-class standards is open to question, but Mifflin certainly was the best Lancaster County produced. We have quite a few prominent authors of the past century but they are beyond our purview.

The Ephrata Cloister press was kept busy turning out religious publications for the Cloister as well as for the Mennonites in the mid-eighteenth century, but its specialized production hardly was representative of local literary tastes beyond the sectarian groups. Secular presses such as Francis Bailey's, William Dickson's, and William Hamilton's published what the proprietors thought would satisfy the general market locally.

An almanac for 1752 seems to be the first secular production of Lancaster. Almanacs were extremely popular during much of our county's history. Farmers relied on them for planting and harvesting as well as for inspiration and general information. Astronomical signs were important in those less scientific days. Mrs. Rowe's *Exercises of the Heart*, published in 1754, was not intended for

maintaining good cardiac health; it was a religious tract. A best-seller was William Dunlap's *The Last Speech and Dying Words of Hugh Davis and George Chambers who were Executed in Lancaster on Saturday, 14th of June 1755*, first edition. Oddly enough, there are no records that document the arrest, trial, sentencing, or execution of either man. Official records indicate no persons were executed in Pennsylvania in 1755. The same printer also published that year *The Pennsylvania Primer for the Use of Country Schools*. Mr. Dunlap, who seemed to take pleasure in publishing sensational items, issued in 1756 W. and E. Fleming's *A Narrative of the Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of William and Elizabeth Fleming Who were taken Captive by the Indians as related by Themselves*. Probably the first genealogy published in Lancaster County was Daniel Bollinger's *Bollinger Family Record* issued in 1763. Francis Bailey in 1774 published *A Melancholy Narrative of the Unhappy Samuel Brandt[t] who was executed at Lancaster . . . on the 18th day of December 1773*. The unhappy Mr. Brandt was indeed hanged as stated for the murder of his brother. During the Revolution many pamphlets attacking the British and counseling patriotism flowed from the local presses.

During the early decades of the nineteenth century nearly every village worthy of the name published a newspaper. The mortality rate was high and changes of ownership were frequent. Plaintive pleas for subscribers to pay were common. One newspaper that had a long and illustrious life was the *Columbia Spy*. In the 1830s the editor of the *Spy* graciously provided space for aspiring poets and short story writers. Years before he became famous, Edgar Allan Poe's stories appeared in the *Spy*.

Certainly Reuben Chambers' *Bethania Palladium*, published at Bethania, also known as Puddingtown, a hamlet along the Strasburg-Gap road, from 1832 to 1834, was one of the more colorful newspapers published in Lancaster County. Mr. Chambers was reared as a Quaker but upon reaching adulthood he proclaimed himself a "freethinker" and "communist." R. J. Houston in 1896 described Chambers thus: "Reuben's Lancaster County neighbors didn't take much stock in new isms or doctrines and hadn't time to chop logic or split hairs with him on subjects they neither knew nor cared about, and it was not long until they came to regard him as a pestilent, quarrelsome fanatic; an infidel and a totally impractical crank, with whom the less they had to do the better." [*Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society* 1 (Nov. 1896) 121]. When it occurred to Chambers that he would become a great and influential editor, he announced the publication of his *Bethania Palladium* in this manner: "The *Palladium* will advocate universal peace, freedom, temperance and the just rights of man. It will encourage husbandry, manufactures and the arts; it will also encourage public schools for the education of youth and will particularly plead the cause of the poor and oppressed." Moreover, Chambers proclaimed, his newspaper was intensely "anti-slavery, anti-Masonic, Anti-Jackson, anti-lotteries, anti-horseracing, and anti-sport." Foxhunting always brought forth the

wrath of the editor. When Chambers attacked the Lancaster Jockey Club, the members staged a race within sight of the *Palladium* office. The furious Chambers published immediately a half-sheet supplement in which he exploded vehemently, describing the race as "The Lower Regions, or a Second Sodom" in large display type. When illness threatened his normal state of frenzy, he taught himself the Thompsonian System and Practice of Medicine. Whenever Chambers was irritated by some issue, he would create a new department in his newspaper, and fill it with his outrageous opinions. Even now, the columns of the *Palladium* are hilarious to read. Mixed in among his diatribes were some perceptive and quite modern sounding thoughts. The Lancaster County Historical Society possesses a file of the *Palladium*. It has been said that England regards her eccentrics as national treasures. Reuben Chambers ranks high as one of Lancaster County's literary oddities.

Local editors and publishers printed periodicals that could be bound into volumes if the readers wished to preserve them. One publication that purported to furnish elevated reading for the entire family was called *The Inciter* and was issued by A. Gilbert of Lancaster in the 1830s. The Reverend Dr. Henry Harbaugh, minister of First Reformed Church in Lancaster, published in the 1850s *The Guardian, devoted to the Social, Literary, and Religious Interests of Young Men and Ladies*. "Life, Light, and Love" was the motto of *The Guardian*. In an article on "The Relation of Husband and Wife," Dr. Harbaugh sounds for all the world as if he were President Bush's speechwriter. Although published late in the nineteenth century, M.S. Weber's *The Matrimonial Review devoted to Courtship, Love, Marriage, Sociology, and Human Rights* must have shocked Lancaster Countians in 1879. Weber, a publisher living in Farmersville, Lancaster County, claimed to be a "matrimonial and social reformer." The subscription price for the monthly magazine was fifty cents, and it had a national circulation. An advertisement inside the cover promotes "phonetic spelling, united labor, common property, equal rights for all, and communism." Weber also published a magazine called *Human Culture*. In an article entitled, "A 'What Is It'" Weber chided the 1880s ladies for the way women dressed the upper parts of their bodies. Weber denounced corsets and bras as unhealthy and unnatural. I wonder how Mr. Weber would fare today among his exceedingly conservative Farmersville neighbors!

Can we learn anything from our forefathers' and foremothers' reading tastes? I believe we can. It should help us understand that we learn from our culture. If we are to believe the Scriptural admonition that "the truth will make you free," we are obliged to read widely and ponder the opinions from many sources.

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