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Address at the Laying of the
Corner Stone

BY

CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS

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ADDRESS AT THE LAYING OF THE CORNER STONE.

Collectively, we are here to-day to lay the corner stone of an edifice, elaborate in design and costly in structure, dedicated solely to the preservation of the records of the past, written, printed or sculptured,—the raw material, so to speak, upon which the historical investigator works. Individually, I am here in no private capacity, but as the head of another and older organization, with a local habitation devoted to much the same end. Representing the Massachusetts Historical Society with its home in Boston, I extend the right hand of fellowship to that American Antiquarian Society which, ever making its abiding-place here in Worcester, to-day formally enters on the construction of what it believes will prove its home for generations of membership. But when, committed to the task, I addressed myself to the work of preparation, I found my thoughts insensibly turning in a direction somewhat unusual,—one, in character, almost paradoxical, and, perhaps, not in entire harmony with the spirit of the occasion. Let me explain.

To compare themselves unfavorably with the earlier time, its achievements, its tendencies and its ideals,—to dwell upon their own earthy shortcomings when placed in bold contrast with the lofty aspirations and heroic accomplishments of an earlier and better day, has been the privilege of almost all countries and of every generation. The decline from loftier ideals,—the general lowering of standards,—the ever-present tendency to materialism, have time out of mind been the favorite text of the poet and the moralist, as to-day they lend inspiration to the ready editorial writer. In this connection memory at once recalls the eloquent voice from Cheyne Row, dilating through

thirty volumes on the golden beauty of silence, as he denounced the garrulous, rag-gathering age in which his own lot was cast, given over to idle talk and the worship of mammon; and he compared a noisy but deteriorated present with the sturdy and patient heroism of a silent past. But, to me standing here to-day, things somehow assume another aspect,—in fact an altogether otherwise aspect;—and, as I see, firmly and truly laid, this corner stone of a building dedicated,—lovingly and reverently dedicated,—to the safe preservation of the memorials of the earlier time, and of the present surely destined itself soon to become an earlier time, I find myself impressed not with an overwhelming sense of our own shortcomings, but, strange to say, with a somewhat bitter realization of the shortcomings of the former generations—shortcomings which we with most strenuous effort in vain strive to make good in some slight degree.

Look at that corner stone! There it rests; and, upon it will presently rise a stately edifice in which will be stored,—safe from moth and rust, from fire and from that damp more destructive than fire,—the accumulated and ever-accumulating records of the past. If there is one thing which more than any other one thing differentiates the civilized human being from the beast that perishes, it is this respect and jealous care of the records of the race. Yet, in its more developed and differentiated form, how old is that care?—how far back can it be traced? It is merely of yesterday at most; in its fully developed phase it is of to-day only.

Take, as examples, the Society I here represent,—take the Society which to-day places this corner stone:—The Massachusetts Historical Society is, I have reason to believe, the earliest historical society, pure and simple, in the world:—it probably antedates all others anywhere,—it certainly antedates all other such societies in America; yet it was organized as recently as 1791, less than a century and a quarter since; while, even according to the biblical chronology, the poor world is, in the language of Rosalind, “almost six thousand years old.” A jealous respect for the

records and memorials of the past is, therefore, a distinctly modern invention! Indeed, as President of the Massachusetts Historical Society, I never think of the matter from this point of view, that a feeling of exasperation does not come over me,—a species of lamentation over what impresses me as an ancient tale of wrong. What were the previous generations doing that they so wholly failed in their obligations,—could in no way rise to an equality with the occasion? Why bequeath to us this *hiatus valde deflendus*? But again I recur to the Society I represent, and our Massachusetts experience. That Society, the undisputed father of all similar societies in the Commonwealth, dates from January, 1791,—a scant 120 years ago. The earliest settlement of Massachusetts had then been effected over 170 years, and, in 1791, the last survivor of those who founded Boston had been over sixty years in his grave. Six succeeding generations had been gathered. In that way in which we have done so much, what had they accomplished? Nothing!—Absolutely nothing!

Yet what priceless human records had in those years been lost,—irretrievably lost! Take a single case,—the first which occurs to me. When Governor John Winthrop and his company, having temporarily, in the early summer of 1630, camped in what is now Charlestown, moved in the autumn of that year across to the opposite peninsula of Shawmut, they found William Blackstone,—a species of hermit, wearing an old canonical coat,—established in what was pronounced for those times “a pleasant cottage,” on the West, or sunset, slope of Beacon Hill, looking up the river Charles. He had already been there five years. Presently he moved away, making for himself a new home at what he called Study Hill, not far from Providence, where the river, which here in Worcester finds its source, still perpetuates his name; and there, forty years later, in 1675, he died. A student, as well as a hermit, William Blackstone left behind him not only a library large for those days,—numbering, indeed, some 160 volumes,—but also ten manuscript books, valued in the inventory of his estate

at the not excessive sum of six-pence each, or five shillings for the lot. Close upon Blackstone's death,—indeed, one short month only after,—King Philip's War broke out; and among the first things to go up in flame and smoke was Blackstone's home. In it were his library, as also those "ten paper books." Shortly before valued at five shillings, these "paper books" in all human probability contained Blackstone's written record of his hermit life at Shawmut during the nine years from 1625 to 1634, and of the forty years subsequently passed by him on the bank of the Blackstone. If they did, we would now give a King's ransom to recover them!—but they are gone—irrevocably gone! How much else of similar character and scarcely less value, throwing light on the men and events of that intensely interesting period,—New England's Genesis,—has also been in like manner lost, cannot even be surmised. All we do know is that it was by merest chance only that Bradford's and Winthrop's unique and invaluable narratives did not also disappear. The first, indeed, vanished wholly, and was lost to sight for nearly a century,—supposed to be irrevocably gone, until, by purest accident, brought slowly to light in London some fifty years ago; while Winthrop's no less inestimable journal was exposed to every vicissitude for a century and a half, and was first put in print as recently as 1825. No common and safe depository for such material existed in 1650; nor, indeed, for over a century after. Its interest and value were simply not understood.

I continually ask myself—How did this occur? Who were the men of those days? Why did it never occur to John Winthrop and John Cotton and Richard Saltonstall that they were founding an Empire, and that it behooved them accordingly to do that which a hundred and seventy years later was at last tardily done by Jeremy Belknap, James Sullivan and James Winthrop? The generation subsequent to the founders produced the Dudleys, the Sewalls and the Mathers; and another, still later, the Rev. Thomas Prince and Dr. Mather Byles and Governor Thomas Hutchinson. How then did it chance that the Massachusetts Historical Society was left to be founded only yesterday

as it were, in 1791, and by men of almost our own time? Why was it not founded, as assuredly it should have been, by Thomas Prince, in 1740; or by Cotton Mather in 1700; or, best of all, by John Cotton and John Winthrop and young Harry Vane, in 1635? Simply, the fathers were not equal to the occasion.

Here in Worcester you did better. Isaiah Thomas, working journalist, practical printer and book-maker that he was, rose more nearly to the required level than the learned Cotton Mather; for, in 1812, when Thomas obtained from the Massachusetts Legislature the Act of Incorporation of this Society, Worcester was a place with but 2,500 inhabitants,—not nearly so large as was Boston when the author of *New England's Magnalia* flourished, over an hundred years before. As I have said, the loss sustained during that hundred years laches of the fathers transcends computation; and, in this respect at least, the world certainly has not since gone backwards. Yet Carlyle stigmatized ours contemptuously as a “rag-gathering generation”! Possibly; still, manuscripts after all are but rags transformed and etherealized; and, assuredly, it would have been far better had the previous generations been equally addicted to the gathering and preservation of that description of rags.

The transformation since effected is great; so great, indeed, that another extreme has, perhaps, resulted. It was in 1794 that the Massachusetts Historical Society was formally incorporated; this, the American Antiquarian Society, followed, in 1812, eighteen years later; and the number of similar societies which have since, and especially of late years, come or been brought into existence, it would be needless, as well as beside my purpose, to try to enumerate; suffice it to say,—Their name, also, is Legion. And thus we now find ourselves looking at the problem from another and wholly different point of view; a point from which one thing only is clear. That thing, however, it behooves all of us who are responsible for these organizations to consider well, and to consider it especially on such an occasion as this. Clearly, as respects such societies, the period of organization is over. In numbers they now

manifestly tend to run into excess; and in that excess is peril;—for the present tendency undeniably is towards the careful and costly preservation of much in no way worth preserving, and to the printing of much more which, if measured by its value, had better never be put in type at all. As a consequence, our museums are already overloaded, while the shelves and stacks of our libraries wholly fail to supply room for an accumulation which dates back a century only. Such an utterance may, especially on such an occasion as this, jar harshly on the ears of some, especially on those of the librarian class; but I venture a confident opinion that the world of scholarship would be in no wise appreciably poorer if one half, and that the larger half, of the printed matter now accumulated in our public libraries could to-morrow be obliterated—swept clean out of existence. The useless accumulation there is already terrific; its future, appalling. The same also is true of our museums—artistic, scientific, archaeologic. The stolid indifference of the fathers has passed in the children into what is little less than a craze of indiscriminate preservation. The abuse will, of course, work its own remedy; but not the less for that is it incumbent on us who are responsible for the present policy of these organizations to take note of the tendencies. Those even now call loudly for reform. For myself, I frankly admit that I never go into a modern museum or glance through the stacks of an up-to-date Public Library without reverting in memory to a remark somewhere made by Hawthorne, after wearisomely plodding through a great European collection,—in Paris, I think,—that it would be a most desirable consummation were some arrangement possible to be made by virtue of which each generation should cart its rubbish off with it. Myself an historical investigator, I, in a way, heartily endorse this suggestion. The crying need to-day is not for fresh and enlarged receptacles; but, to use a few long words, for a wiser discrimination and a more scientific differentiation.

Moreover, not only do we accumulate too much, but, regardless of cost, space or utility, we duplicate these excessive accumulations. In this respect, it is, I confidently

submit, with institutions much as it is with individuals. In the case of individuals, the noble aspirations and not unreasonable standards of even a century since would now by us be considered Quixotic; and most justly so. In 1600, Bacon, for instance, declared that he took all Learning for his Province; and from that day to this, the utterance has in him been admired. But such a purpose, humanly speaking, a possibility then, would now, if in like way announced, be regarded as the mouthing rhodomontade of a born sciolist. What is true in this respect of men is true also of organizations. To justify a continued existence they must in future differentiate; and, discarding all thought of universality, seek perfection in narrower but more carefully selected fields. A full recognition of this fact, and implicit obedience to the law which therefrom follows, are, I hold, essential to the continued usefulness, not only of the Society I here represent and the sister Society which to-day sets this corner stone, but of all similar organizations. Each must take to heart old Pliny's maxim, and, like a cobbler, stick to his last.

For example, take the case in hand:—This American Antiquarian Society was founded on a plan natural and proper enough a century ago; manifestly, too ambitious now. Its chief and ostensible object was to be “the collecting and preserving the materials for a study of American History and antiquities”; but, in the century which has since intervened, American history and American antiquities have so differentiated and developed that no Society, local or otherwise, can hope to cover the field in its entirety. Did it attempt so to do it could at best only hope in some respects, and at great outlay, in a superficial way to duplicate what was much more thoroughly done elsewhere. It can attain force and excellence only by concentrated limitation; it must put forth its strength and apply its resources in some more narrowly selected field.

In the case of this Society, that field, most fortunately, as it has seemed to me, is to a great extent marked out for it in advance. Its founder, Isaiah Thomas, I have already referred to. He was himself a journalist, and the author

of a history, for those days elaborate, of printing in America. He gave to the organization its initial impetus; and, accordingly, it is in the productions of the early American press that your collections, already strong, should be slowly, systematically and patiently perfected. Through gift and purchase and exchange, your mission should be to get into the possession of the American Antiquarian Society specimens of everything printed in America prior to 1820, especially journals and newspapers. The total of titles so included would, I see it estimated in your "Handbook," be some 75,000 in number, of which the library already possesses over one-third. Slowly to complete the list at whatever sacrifice of time, labor and money, or through exchange or facsimile reproduction, should be the Society's mission as well as pride; and the value of such a collection, once made complete, it has been truly said, could not be over-estimated.

This, prior to 1820; subsequently to that date the effort at inclusive perfection should, I submit, in wisdom be further differentiated, and yet more strictly localized. It should be specialized on what is known as "the Heart of the Commonwealth." Your collection should be made to include every book, periodical, journal or newspaper printed within a specific area, all the municipal documents and corporate reports of that area, and every manuscript record relating to it, judged worthy of preservation, upon which hands can be laid; and to universality and completeness in this chosen field other things should be made to give way. Space, money, thought and labor—all should be devoted to the accomplishment of one well-defined result. Miscellaneous literature and collections, no matter how tempting—works of art or of archaeology, no matter how rare,—both can, and assuredly will find a more appropriate place elsewhere, in libraries and museums specially designed for their reception, display and study.

Looked at from this point of view, the situation needs to be grasped in a spirit at once large, comprehensive, catholic; for it is a world-wide problem, directly subject to far-reaching modern influences. It is, for instance,

always affected, sometimes revolutionized, by each new development of steam, electricity or chemistry. Everlastingly subject to these influences, the librarian and curator will in time get so far as to realize that this world of ours is, as respects its accumulations, passing out of the bookworm and provincial phase. The period of miscellaneous, accidental and duplicated collection is over, and civilization is entering on an epoch of collectivism and concentration. Completeness, on the one hand, and the elimination of the superfluous and the useless on the other, are the two great desiderata; but, to bring them about as results will at best be a very gradual educational process. The jackdaw and magpie spirit cannot be exorcized; and so it must be outgrown. Once, however, it is outgrown, and a more comprehensive and scientific method matured in place of it, the process of accumulation will proceed on a carefully matured plan, thereafter persistently adhered to.

It is in the power, and in my judgment should be the ambition and the province of the American Antiquarian Society to contribute effectively and appreciably towards bringing this result about. Should it rise to an equality with the great occasion, the stone this day laid will prove indeed monumental,—a finger-post no less than a mile-stone.







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