The Historical Society's Part in American Education

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I AM deeply honored to serve as your speaker this afternoon and to share with you the occasion of your fiftieth anniversary. It is altogether appropriate that a member of the faculty of one of New England's oldest and most distinguished colleges should address you on the role of the historical society in American education. As a teacher my daily concern is education, and my special field—the history of art—is directly related to your work. However, in order to establish a basis for the ideas I should like to express we must first examine carefully the title of this talk—*The Historical Society's Part in American Education.*

I call your attention first to the word, *education.* According to Webster, education is the process of developing and cultivating the mind through systematic instruction. We take this definition for granted today and because we are aware of the need for formal learning in a productive and creative society, we in America provide more opportunities for liberal and vocational education than any other country in the world. In this respect, New Englanders have every reason to be proud of the fact that the common schools established here in the early colonial period were the first of their kind in the western world. But it was the inimitable Thomas Jefferson who first formulated the comprehensive system of education which we have in this country today. In 1779, only three years after the Declaration of Independence, a "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," written by Jefferson, was introduced into the Virginia Legislature. Although it was never passed, it provided a graded system of universal secular education so that those, in Jefferson's own words, "whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue should be called to that charge without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition or circumstance." The object of this bill was to seek out highly motivated and intelligent men and to render them "by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens."

Later in his life, Jefferson's dream was partially realized in the founding of the University of Virginia. Unparalleled in its day, this great institution still stands as one of the most enlightened and visionary conceptions in the history of western man. While a New England college president was proudly assuring the public that Gibbon's godless *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was banned from his institution of learning, the University of Virginia, Jefferson said at the time, "will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. For here we are not afraid to follow the

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr. Pierson's paper, delivered on the afternoon of May 21, 1960, as the principal address of the Society's Fiftieth Annual Meeting, is published here in its entirety for those of our members who could not attend the meeting.

truth wherever it may lead or to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."

The lofty ideals, so farseeing in the early nineteenth century, are accepted universal principles of education in this country today, and the vast network of institutions which has grown up around them form the very heart of our creative powers as a nation. Any historical society which would play an active role in education must first seek to know the needs and objectives of both the teacher and the institution.

So far, we have concerned ourselves only with the institution. However, if we would understand the full meaning of education we must go beyond the instrument of learning to the product itself, the educated man. Every year at the Williams College Commencement exercises, our president, as he grants the degrees to the candidates, says the following words: "By virtue of the authority delegated to me . . . I confer upon you . . . the Degree of Bachelor of Arts and admit you to the fellowship of educated men." I am puzzled every time I hear this pronouncement. For what indeed is an educated man? I am not sure that I can give you a satisfactory answer to this question, but of one thing I am certain; in spite of our president's solemn words, none of the young men who receive their degrees are, in the fullest sense of the word, educated men.

Originating partially in our admiration for large scale organization and stimulated by the competitive nature of American society, there has developed in this country a strange mystique toward the college degree. Reflecting our mass production methods, the American college is seen as a kind of factory into which is poured the raw material of the partially formed human mind and from which there emerges the finished product, the educated man. Nothing could be farther from the truth. What the college *does* provide is the opportunity for systematic study under the guidance and stimulation of experts in various fields. The information acquired in college is not an end in itself. It is really only the beginning and is meaningful only to the extent that it forms a basis for ever expanding horizons. Jefferson was quick to recognize that the true function of the educational institution was to provide the instruments of learning rather than learning itself. The rest was up to the individual.

That Jefferson considered the most valuable intellectual development to be self-development is clearly evident in the advice which he gave to aspiring young lawyers. His suggestions take the form of detailed instructions for a daily schedule which constitutes approximately eleven hours of concentrated reading and study. One wonders whether the young men so advised were able to maintain such a vigorous program but that Jefferson did, at least for a large part of his life, there can be no doubt.

If we accept the premise that education is a continuing and not a definitive process, then all kinds of exciting educational opportunities are opened to organizations such as yours. But before I get into the specifics of this problem, let me focus my attention for a moment upon you, the historical society. If I assess your objectives and methods correctly, your work is primarily associated with a special branch of learning, *cultural history*. It is obvious, therefore, that in order to evaluate your role in American education, it is necessary to give some consideration to the meaning of history.

Again, I refer to Webster where history is defined as that branch of knowledge that records and explains past events. I do not like this definition because it implies that only events make history, yet there are vast areas of human creative effort which have nothing to do with events. I refer specifically to such things as literature, music and art. In constructing the profile of any given culture, it is just as important to refer to these as it is to wars and politics. I prefer to think of history as the totality of human thought and action, and I offer as my own definition that *history is the biography of human endeavor.* I use the word biography because we are dealing with men, and I prefer human endeavor because we are concerned with activity in the most comprehensive sense, which includes methods as well as results.

But history is not only the totality of action—it is also continuous action. Every moment of time which we live joins the past to become part of its unfolding panorama. It is perfectly true that in the course of human endeavor, certain civilizations emerge with positive characteristics, and because of these characteristics they can be understood as distinct and separate from other civilizations with differing characteristics. Nevertheless, the fact remains that no fragment of history exists independently of either its environment or its past, nor is it without some hint to the future. I like to think of each epoch as a great river fed by thousands of tributaries which gradually come together to form one mighty stream. For a brief moment this stream moves alone—powerful, resolute, unequivocal. Then, through the disintegrating forces of its own inner workings, it forms into a delta and breaks up into smaller fragments to be lost in the oblivion of the sea. And just as the size, the shape, the volume, the direction, and even the color of the main stream are determined, not by one, but by all of the tributaries which feed it, so the main streams of history take their character, not from one, but from all of the influences which are brought to bear upon them. Furthermore, and this is the most important point, like education, history never stops.

With these general concepts of education and history in mind, we may now turn to our major problem, the role of the historical society in American education. Since your primary objective is the preservation of antiquity, our curiosity centers at once upon the specific nature of the thing to be preserved. Let us make our approach by way of our metaphorical river, up its various tributaries to the spring sources themselves. Here we encounter history in its basic and most fragmentary form, the written documents. Ranging from letters, contracts, wills and deeds through diaries, tracts, sermons and books, they contain the facts of history and are familiar to you. Their handling, storage, and cataloguing, accomplished through the well-established techniques of the trained archivist and librarian, are routine and need not concern us here. The important thing is that the facts should be properly cared for and should be made readily available to students and scholars alike.

But documents are not the only source material with which you are concerned. As a matter of fact, from the point of view of the general public, they are probably the least well-known and the least attractive. Far more tangible are the artifacts and works of art. As source material, these are every bit as important as the documents, and they de-

mand the same attention and care. However, the preservation problem is infinitely more complex. Since they differ in size from small handmade objects to actual buildings, the requirements of storage, display, maintenance and repair all necessitate highly qualified personnel who are trained in specialized techniques. You as historical societies are already effectively solving these problems, and since it is not my field, I would not presume to advise you. I wish only to urge that in preserving historic facts, you preserve them *all* and not just a select few.

Now you may very well ask, why all the facts? Why not just those which interest us? Anyone familiar with the workings of military intelligence knows that information of considerable magnitude is sometimes revealed through the accumulated evidence of seemingly unimportant and seemingly irrelevant facts. Precisely the same is true of historical research. An inclusive body of data is absolutely essential to good history. The material which you are bringing together is a priceless source for the professional historian, and by giving him access to it you are making a significant contribution to American education.

But the facts of history are also important to the average citizen. Unlike the historian, however, he does not have the specialized knowledge necessary to see the forest for the trees. Vast accumulations of facts might at first impress him, but they will not hold his interest for very long. To give them meaning, they must be sorted and arranged in systematic relationships and they must be accompanied by some kind of descriptive or guide material. But at this point, we move from the preservation of the facts to the interpretation of the facts and when this happens, we are no longer antiquarians—we have become historians.

It is in this capacity, as interpreter of history, that the role of the historical society in American education takes its most specific shape. It seems to me that the possibilities are of two general types, those associated with institutions and those directed toward the individual. The first type, which is the easier to implement, takes the form of collaborative programs with already existing educational institutions. Many of you are currently engaged in this activity but for those who are not, may I recommend that you approach the various teachers of American history and American art in the schools that are within the radius of your various facilities. Suggest to them such possibilities as organized visits, lectures, changing exhibitions and, in the case of more advanced students, short term intensive study programs to be held during available free periods such as weekends or holidays. I think you will find that most teachers are eager to take advantage of whatever you may have to offer provided it can be made meaningful in terms of their own objectives. This is a matter of give and take between you and the teacher.

The second type of possibility is found in the new and relatively unexplored realm of adult education. What specific character programs of this sort would take still remains to be determined, but I have three basic suggestions to make: they should be over and above any collaborative efforts you might establish with already existing institutions, they should be directed toward the average citizen as well as the professional, and the actual teaching should be done by the best teachers you can persuade to participate. Some efforts along these lines have already been made in this country but

the most imaginative experiments are being carried out in England. The all year around program at Attingham Park near Shrewsbury, which is already known to many of you, is the most extensive and has produced rewarding results. It consists of a series of short courses which are open to anyone who has the time and can afford the modest fee. Ranging from a weekend to three weeks in duration, they include such subjects as poetry, music, the dance, history, economics and architecture. Most important, the teachers are drawn from the most renowned scholars and educators of England. Initiative along similar lines by American historical societies, working singly or together, could pave the way for equally stimulating programs in this country. Every opportunity which gives the individual a chance to expand his own knowledge under experienced guidance brings us closer to the ideal that the best intellectual development is self-development.

To be part of an educational project of any kind is not only a challenge, it also carries with it grave responsibilities. During the years I have been teaching that which has moved me the most deeply has been the direct simplicity with which the vast majority of my students have accepted what I have told them as the truth. There have been, of course, the brilliant young men who have questioned me at every turn, but for most of them, the ideas expressed by me have gone unchallenged.

This is a sobering thought. In such a relationship, one cannot indulge personal taste or bias, nor can one permit undisciplined speculation to take the place of objective evaluation. This means that whenever you so much as exhibit an object, you are in the business of education, and with it you must assume all the responsibility which it entails. The way you display the object, the things you say about it, and, indeed, the very fact that you show it at all gives it the stamp of authority and in the eyes of the average observer it will be understood as the truth. Not to meet this responsibility is to perpetuate error and this is irresponsible history.

Let me illustrate for you in greater detail what I mean by irresponsible history. I have in my library a new book on art. It was put out by a reputable publishing house, has an impressive organization, is attractively laid out, and contains a considerable number of good to excellent illustrations. In one of the sections on architecture one may read the following: "The most influential architect to work in the Georgian baroque style was Sir Christopher Wren, whose greatest achievement was St. Paul's cathedral in London." Passed over quickly, this would seem to be a perfectly accurate statement, for surely St. Paul's is Wren's greatest achievement, and it is certainly among the most prominent of the English baroque churches. We also note that Wren did not die until 1723, nine years after George I came to the throne. Thus, it can effectively be said that he lived over into the Georgian period, although it should be realized that he was in his nineties at the time and well past his prime. We must also point out that St. Paul's was begun in 1673 and completed by 1710. Furthermore, the high baroque style in England is generally recognized to be that of Wren and his immediate contemporaries in the last years of the seventeenth century, while the English *Georgian* style, which officially began in 1716 with the launching of Lord Burlington's Palla-

dian movement, *was a violent reaction against the baroque*. The two styles could hardly be more different either in ideal or in fact. And this is not new information based upon recent research, it is an opinion which has been held by authorities for a great many years and is available in any standard handbook on English architecture. Thus, to combine these two ideas as the author does in the single stylistic phrase, "Georgian baroque," is a misleading contradiction. Furthermore, in the book one discovers other misconceptions of a similar magnitude. Yet this volume, because of its comprehensive nature and its attractive format, will unquestionably be widely sold, and because of its date, 1960, it will be accepted by the uninformed as the latest and most authoritative book on the subject.

The reader, informed or not, has every right to expect that a book which purports to be a history should be accurate. To encounter error of this kind points up as nothing else can that no responsible history can be written unless it is based upon accurate and authoritative facts, that no analysis of style or formal idea can be developed unless it is built upon original and documented material. It also reminds us that nothing in history, not even the most provincial object, exists in a vacuum. Everything derives from multiple sources and can only be understood in terms of those sources. Thus, local history with all its personal associations and enthusiasms must, nevertheless, always be referred to the larger segments of influence to which it is irrevocably joined. The axiom is very simple, if you don't know the answer, ask someone who does.

There are other potential dangers of which the historian should be aware, dangers which arise from the growing tendency in this country to provide by restoration that which does not exist in fact. The outstanding example of modern historical restoration in America is Colonial Williamsburg. Through the unlimited Rockefeller resources, it has been possible to reconstruct the entire colonial capital virtually in its original form. This fantastic undertaking is based on a mountain of authoritative evidence derived from a long-range program of exhaustive and careful research. As a result, it is probably as accurate as it is humanly possible to make it. Furthermore, and equally important, that which is restoration is clearly indicated as such so that the visitor has no trouble whatsoever in distinguishing the original from the restored. It is probably the most remarkable outdoor museum of its kind in the country.

But Williamsburg has also had its negative effects. First of all, it has done more than anything else to establish the idea that restoration is a legitimate means of presenting history. It is extremely difficult, of course, to draw the line between that which is legitimate and that which is not. Generally speaking, however, a restoration may be said to have historical meaning only when there is nothing else of its kind in existence, or, when it replaces an original monument which has, through time or disaster, been destroyed. In either case, the fabric of the restored object must be supported by authentic documentation. Such is the case at Williamsburg.

Perhaps I can help you to understand my point of view by giving you an illustration from my own environment. There is in Williamstown a very fine church which is a close copy of the Congregational church in Old Lyme,

Connecticut. The original church in Old Lyme was built in 1816 and we all recognize it as one of the most beautiful of its kind in New England. This building burned to the ground in 1907 but was rebuilt as faithfully as possible in 1910. Four years later, in Williamstown, a romanesque church of the Victorian era was stripped of its two towers and other appendages, and over the remaining brick walls was nailed a wooden replica of the Old Lyme church. Almost the entire façade and most of the interior details were developed from the drawings which had been used for the reconstruction in Old Lyme. The similarities, therefore, are as close as the shape and size of the old brick walls would permit. It would seem, then, that I have at my finger tips a splendid example of early nineteenth-century architecture to use in teaching American art. The truth is that I never mention the Williamstown church to my class, except as an example of what I consider a deplorable attitude toward architecture, and I never take them to visit it. Instead I take them to Old Bennington, Vermont, where we can study a superb original church of the early nineteenth century.

Our church in Williamstown is an exquisite building and is a gracious addition to the main street of our community. As a member of its congregation, I have a deep affection for it. However, my personal feelings cannot be permitted to affect my critical judgment, and the fact remains that the building is a gross imitation, a suit of period clothes on an old mannikin, which is beautiful only because the church in Old Lyme is beautiful and not because of any creative act on the part of the devoted and well-meaning church fathers who brought it into being. If a work of architecture is to be expressive of its own time, it must be the product of a contemporary creative imagination, and imitation can never be creative.

The false historical impression created by the Williamstown church is compounded by the extraordinary accuracy with which it conveys the image of the Federal style. I cannot tell you how many times I have seen an unsuspecting tourist stop his car and, with camera in hand, inspect and photograph the church from end to end. Then he reads the plaque on the front which tells him that it was founded in 1765—there is no mention of the fact that it was built in 1914—and with his knowledge he goes on his way serene in the conviction that he has just added another fine example of early American architecture to his collection of color slides. Worse yet, if he happens to be a teacher who is not too well informed in the subject—and there are many of these—he might even show it to his class as an example of that which it is not. For the Williamstown church is a replica and can never be regarded as authentic history.

Our critical senses are so dulled in this country by the continuous flood of fiction, fancy, and utter madness, which is poured into our eyes and ears both day and night through television and the motion pictures that most of us have no trouble at all in accepting restoration as history. This makes it all the more important to consider the problem seriously and objectively before any decision is made to present a restoration as historical fact. For unless it is supported by authentic documentation, and unless the reason for it is unequivocal, the restoration can all too easily disintegrate into the make-believe of a pure stage set.

To return to Williamsburg, Virginia,

another disturbing fact about this restoration is that the very magnitude of the undertaking places an undue emphasis upon a narrow period in colonial history. There can be no question that Williamsburg was by far the most impressive of all the colonial capitals. Yet, looking to the ultimate evolution of American architecture it was the least American of them all. It was begun under the direct auspices of the British crown in the last years of the seventeenth century, and the earliest of the buildings, the College of William and Mary, was actually planned in the office of the Surveyor General, Sir Christopher Wren. And although there is no evidence to prove that any of the other buildings were similarly planned, they certainly were carried out in the contemporary Wren baroque manner and were comparable, both in quality and style, to many lesser buildings of the Wren period in England. What Colonial Williamsburg has brought back to a second life is probably the most thoroughly British segment of the eighteenth-century Atlantic seaboard. It was this very British character which in part led Thomas Jefferson to denounce some of the Williamsburg buildings as ". . . rude misshapen piles which, but they have roofs, would be taken for brick kilns." It also inspired him, immediately following the revolution, to propose a bill in the Virginia Legislature which called for the moving of the capital from Williamsburg to Richmond. You all know that this bill was passed and that Williamsburg was left to fall into ruin until the Rockefeller restoration program started.

But Williamsburg is not alone in its narrow historical emphasis. In New England, too, the overwhelming majority of preservation efforts have gone into buildings of the seventeenth, the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. The reasons for this are clear. These buildings are, indeed, our most ancient monuments and our attention would naturally focus upon them first. But in the broad view of American history, this is not all that New England stands for. America today is one of the great industrial nations of the world, and I am sure that most of you are aware that it is right here in New England that the beginnings of that development are to be found. The first factory in the world in which the entire process of manufacturing a piece of cloth from the raw material to the finished product is still standing here in Waltham. There are surviving also in New England the remnants of a few of our early industrial communities. At the time they were built, these fascinating experiments in working and living were unique in the western world. Yet, one by one, they are disappearing. A few efforts are being made to preserve them, but for the most part they are of little interest to anyone.

The nineteenth century in America was a period of enormous creative activity in all phases of American life, and the ideals and aspirations of this vital era have their reflection in the architecture. Currently, there are a few serious efforts to preserve some of these buildings. Generally speaking, however, distinguished examples of nineteenth-century architecture are being demolished right and left, and most people are glad to see them go. Even more deplorable is the fact that in some instances they have been destroyed to make way for restorations of the eighteenth century.

As a matter of fact, the nineteenth century is a more truly American period, for it was during these years that our

character as an independent nation was formed. We are too easily deluded by the common conviction that antiquity is a measure of importance, and too frequently we assign to an object values which it may not have at all, simply because it is old. But an age is no less past if it existed fifty years ago than if it existed two hundred years ago, and the Emancipation Proclamation is no less important because it was written in the nineteenth century than is the Declaration of Independence because it was written in the the eighteenth century.

To focus one's attention upon one's immediate environment and background is a natural and honorable state of mind, and without the intelligent devotion of those of you who are preserving and interpreting local history, the larger picture could never be drawn. On the other hand, we must beware of historical provincialism. We must keep an open mind to the problems of our own communities, and we must never forget that history is continuous. The preservation of the past can only be meaningful to the extent that it enriches our lives and makes us better qualified to cope with the problems of the present. The demands of today are insistent and they are just, and they cannot be met by taking refuge in the image of the past. No more deadly harm can be done to the human mind than by depreciation of the present.

When you as historical societies enter the field of education—and you do every time you open one of your properties to the public—you are treading on holy ground. Education is a sacred trust which has in its charge the formation of the human mind. There is no graver responsibility under the sun, for here are to be found the challenge and the awesome promise of creativity, and that which is learned today becomes the essence of tomorrow. There is no room here for make-believe. This responsibility can only be met, as Thomas Jefferson so wisely observed, by following truth wherever it may lead and by tolerating error *only* so long as reason is left free to combat it.