Western Civilization

The Clements Library will eventually be the recipient of one of the most exciting Western Americana collections to come on the market for some time—the Alexander P. Crittenden Papers—of which there was a hint in the last Quarto.

A Kentuckian, nephew of Senator John J. Crittenden and first cousin of Civil War generals on both sides of the conflict, he graduated from West Point in 1836, married a Virginia girl, and headed for the Texas frontier. A decade later, he joined an overland expedition to California, where he became an early political leader, a leading advocate of the Confederacy, and eventually the victim of a nationally famous scandal—his murder at the hands of a jealous mistress in 1870. The collection is in the safe keeping of the library, but will not be available for research for some time.

One of the characteristics of Crittenden family members at their best is thoughtfulness and felicity of expression. With the owner’s permission, we quote a letter of A. P. Crittenden dated April 8, 1851 from Sacramento, describing to his wife back in Texas a recent excursion:

"Sutter’s Fort is only about two miles from town. In company with Cornwall and his wife I rode out last Sunday to gather mushrooms and flowers—a mixture of the useful and sentimental wasn’t it? We took the road to the Fort and went through it. It is now abandoned and its old adobe walls will be in ruins before long. It was a famous place in the history of this country. A frontier outpost—the property of a private individual, who kept up something of regal state and treated with Mexico like an inconstant potentate. The great Republic became jealous of him and sent an army against him. They not only failed to take him, but had to appeal to him to relieve them from starvation, offering to leave him unmolested for the future. He supplied their wants and sent them away in peace.

"A few years ago this spot was almost out of the world. To form some idea how remote it was from civilization read Fremont’s account of it. Then think of the change. Instead of approaching this place by a desolate and dangerous overland route of months duration—almost unexplored—or by a six-month’s voyage around Cape Horn, I came to the vicinity the other day in one of the most magnificent steamers that ever floated—a palace—carpeted with finest Brussels—with cushions and armed chairs of crimson velvet—doors and panelwork of mahogany—made glorious by all the arts of painting and gilding. I passed through the old Fort in a splendid barouche lined with satin—drawn by a pair of finely matched bays—a turnout then which none more elegant could be found in the city of New York.

"Then, inside the Fort, instead of the barren prairie or patch of undergrowth, was a city—of many thousand inhabitants. There were the masts of vessels—the chimneys of steamers—outside of the town, was a plain dotted with houses and farms. Man had changed the whole face of nature. This inaccessible place had been brought near to civilization. All its refinements and luxuries are now here.

"Yes, the Americans are a great people! Great as discoverers—great as inventors—a moving, restless unquiet people! A people whose special vocation is to explore and settle wildernesses—to lay out great cities and drive stakes, as I heard a man remark in the legislature last year, ‘where mortal foot never had trod and never would tread again!’ A land robbing people—a Christian people who paved the way for the gospel and morality with whiskey, revolvers, Bowie knives, cards and other queer and inappropriate things. A people who carry vice to extremes in order to display the beauties of virtue. An American scoundrel is the greatest ruffian of the world. The most degraded of all created things is an American prostitute. . . . The vast majority of women in this country are those who clearly do not fall
within the class of respectable, and they are encountered everywhere—on the streets—in all public houses—saloons—shows—theaters.

“It is only of late that ladies—real veritable ladies—are becoming at all common. Society here has been in that condition to which it inevitably comes when perfect license exists to do as one pleases without restraint from public opinion. Now such an opinion is growing up in this country. Now there is arising a distinction between what is reputable and what is disreputable, and in the course of a few years there will be as much outward morality here as in any older State. But as yet it is not so—and every day one meets with scenes to be encountered nowhere else.”

Custer’s Cavalry

For THRILLS and pageantry, no military branch has ever been able to match the cavalry. George W. Hunt joined the 15th New York Volunteer Cavalry in 1863. A year later his unit became part of the 3d Division, commanded by Brig. Gen. George Armstrong Custer. Hunt’s memoir of the war is a stirring tribute to Custer and a fine narrative of cavalry action.

In October, 1864, Phil Sheridan’s Shenandoah campaign was winding down, the troops withdrawing from the valley to join General Grant. But the 3d Division was being harried by Confederate cavalry, including a brigade under Gen. Thomas Lafayette Rosser, Custer’s erstwhile friend and West Point classmate. At Tom’s Brook, Virginia, the Union forces engaged the enemy in what the men later called the “Woodstock Races.”

Hunt recalled, “It was a magnificent place for a cavalry fight. There was room to deploy, smooth ground to ride on; all the rail fences had long ago vanished for soldiers’ fires . . . Out rode Custer from his staff, far in advance of the line, in plain view of both armies. Sweeping off his broad-brimmed hat, he threw it down to his knee in a profound salute to his foe.

“Custer replaced his hat, turned to his line of men and the next moment the 3d Division was sweeping on at a trot, the flaming neck tie and bright curls of Custer before all, followed by his staff, all swords out. Now the pace quickens. The rebel guns open at shorter range, bullets and shells whistling over the heads of the men . . . The trot becomes a gallop, a wild yell from the line and they go racing across the intervening space with waving sabres, the horses wild with excitement as they race for the rebel batteries.”

Hunt’s two wartime diaries, as well as his 70-page memoir, were recently purchased by the Clements Library.

Associates Purchases

At their MEETING ON MAY 11, the Board of Governors of the Clements Library Associates purchased a diverse selection of printed and manuscript items for the permanent collection. The most timely, in light of a visit to the library in late June by the Queen of Holland, was a collection of thirteen Dutch pamphlets relating to America. Two date from the 1660’s, when the Dutch held sway along both the Hudson and Delaware Rivers, the remainder from the
Revolutionary War period when their financial support and diplomatic recognition gave invaluable strength to the American cause. Of the thirteen titles, three seem to be unique to American libraries, six others in but one location.

The most intriguing item purchased by the Board is of similar rarity, located at but a single library in the National Union Catalog, and there in variant form. In 1803, Thomas Sheraton began publishing, in parts, The Cabinet Maker, Upholsterer, and General Artist's Encyclopaedia, although he completed but a portion of it before he died. It is, to say the least, a strange publication, combining encyclopedia text having nothing to do with cabinet work and technical descriptions of furniture designs, accompanied by striking hand-colored plates. Our copy has a “preliminary” subscription list but no titlepage and 50 colored furniture engravings.

Sheraton's later designs were uniformly criticized by earlier art historians for departing from his early simplicity and incorporating styles of the French Empire. Thanks to such places as Winterthur and Antiques Magazine, we now have a far greater appreciation of Empire furniture, and what looked grotesque a generation ago is now appreciated on its own terms. We also know to what an extent wealthy, self-conscious Americans craved the latest European styles, accepting trends more uncritically, perhaps, than Europeans. Sheraton's book almost certainly was known to immigrant craftsmen of the time. It is a most captivating addition to our growing collection on the decorative arts.

Benjamin Church wrote the most important and readable account of King Philip's War. We have long possessed the scarce first edition (Boston, 1716) and several later reprints, but not the second, printed in Newport in 1772. It is with delight that we were provided one by the Associates, because it contains two of Paul Revere's engravings: a portrait of Church and a marvelous portrait of King Philip. Neither of the subjects, both long deceased when Revere executed the copper plates, are likely to have had the slightest resemblance to their “likenesses,” but they are among the more important prints of the future patriot, and the book is quite scarce.

Two of the purchases are exceptional for their beauty. Bowles' Universal Display of the Naval Flags of all Nations (London, 1783) contains exquisite hand-colored copper engravings of the world's flags. The newest entry into the community of nations, the equivalent of a Third World Nation of today, is the United States, and Old Glory is here introduced to the Old World for the first time in living color. In 1840, Thomas C. Millington published a handsome colored lithograph of William and Mary College. Most of the older colleges had been represented in engravings by this date, but this is the first large-scale view of our second oldest institution of higher education. It has particular importance, because the original "Wren Building" portrayed here was twice burned in the Civil War era.

Two purchases added to our strong holdings on the mid-western frontier of the late eighteenth century. With the papers of Josiah Harmar and Anthony Wayne, we are one of the most important repositories documenting the Indian frontier of the 1790s in Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana. In the period between the commands of these two generals, Arthur St. Clair exercised control of U.S. forces in the Northwest and we have but scattered documentation of this period, 1790–95. The Board purchased a lengthy letter dated 1834 of Jacob Slaugh, lieutenant under St. Clair, describing first-hand the defeat of U.S. troops in 1791. They also secured the exceedingly scarce first printing of The Remarkable Adventures of Jackson Johnnet (Boston, 1798), the account of a soldier under Harmar and St. Clair who had the misfortune to be captured by the Indians.

For decades, the library has very selectively added Confederate imprints to the collection and has also assiduously built upon our strong holdings on slavery and the antislavery movement. Charles Colcock Jones' Religious Instruction of the Negroes (Augusta, Georgia, 1861), one of the minority of Confederate publications with real content, was too important to pass up.

The final item selected by the Board, we are not ashamed to admit, is an outright scandal! Scandalous in character, at least, because they acquired for us volumes one and two of The National Police Gazette (New York, 1845–47). The progenitor in a long tradition of sensational journalism, it was not the kind of publication subscribed to by circulating libraries and is reported in only three collections today. In addition to lurid woodcuts of pickpockets and murderers and remarkably complete records of the proceedings of criminal courts, it contains first-rate western Americana.

The library extends its deepest thanks to the Board and to the Associates in general, whose generous support makes such purchases possible.
Sir Henry Strachey's Papers

COLLECTING MANUSCRIPTS is often a matter of patience and perseverance, a willingness to keep looking and questioning. The Clements recently picked up the trail of a collection of British manuscripts which Randolph G. Adams, the Library's first director, examined in 1929. The papers of Sir Henry Strachey, a British statesman involved in both the Howe Peace Commission in 1776 and negotiations ending the Revolutionary War, have been a tantalizing, elusive body of manuscripts.

The papers first came to public attention in the late 19th century when they were still in the possession of Baron Strachie at Sutton Court. The Historical Manuscripts Commission prepared a calendar which indicated an impressive amount of material relating to the American Revolution. Today, the location of much of this material remains a mystery. Adams was shown only a portion of it in 1929; none of the American items were with the Strachey family papers when they were deposited at the Somerset Record Office in 1943. Since then three small lots have appeared at Sotheby's auctions, in 1921, 1967 and 1981. Each time the Clements was able to buy important American items, in the last two instances through the generosity of the Associates.

Contemporaries described Sir Henry Strachey as a man of unusual ability, intelligence and integrity. The son of an impoverished Somerset County family, he began his public career as secretary to Clive in 1764, and spent the next decade in India. During this time he developed a close personal relationship with the Governor, and assumed a large share of the administrative duties when Clive’s health began to fail. Strachey’s administrative talent made him a logical choice as secretary to the Peace Commission in 1776. The French ambassador to London, commenting on the abortive mission, noted that Strachey was “a man of merit” but Lord Howe was “very muddled.”

Strachey’s political career was remarkable by eighteenth century standards. His skill as a “man of business” in the House of Commons allowed him to rise above the usual factions. He supported the North administration’s war against America, yet was a valuable member of Shelburne’s liberal administration during the Paris peace negotiations in 1782-3.

Strachey was also a devoted husband and among the letters we recently acquired was a lengthy, amusing account, written for his wife Jane, describing life in Philadelphia during the winter of 1778. Strachey was particularly taken by the American ritual of “tea drinkings,” where “the young lady who makes and dispenses that favorite liquor thinks herself a very eminent personage. The table is decorated with many more cups than are necessary, and a silver kitchen completes the ornamental part of the repast. But this is nothing, unless the presiding goddess has at least one beau next to her, who pays his whole adoration to her alone. If he wishes to be thought gallant, he must stick to her and be in hot water during the ceremony which is never of short duration.”

During his two years in America Strachey had invested in plantations in South Carolina and Florida. A large portion of the newly purchased manuscripts relate to the management of these estates. Like many other absentee landlords, Strachey found himself constantly embroiled in financial difficulties over crops, slaves, and less than honest managers. The papers contain documents for a string of lawsuits involving the slave trade and offer valuable evidence about how that dreadful business was conducted on an American plantation in the 1790’s.

Whether Strachey is commenting on politics, social manners or his own finances, he is an astute observer, and the manuscript record which he left is well worth pursuit.

Donations

Two Interesting Gifts, a book and a manuscript, have been received from Associate Peter Frantz of Bay City. The manuscript is an autograph letter of the British admiral, Richard Howe, written in 1767, recommending a friend’s son for the Navy. The book, in an early tooled binding, is a sixteenth century collection of descriptions of appearances of the Virgin Mary, and includes references to Pigafetta, Magellan’s companion, and Columbus. We are grateful to Mr. Frantz for his thoughtfulness.

The Ann Arbor Book Society, which was formed in 1980 and has held several meetings in the Clements Library, has presented the Library with two items. One is a rare sermon by Cotton Mather, published in Boston in 1713. The other, an early Confederate imprint, was published in Charleston, S.C., in 1861, and describes the bombardment of Fort Sumter. Our thanks go to the members of the Society for these gifts.