IN CELEBRATION OF OUR NATION’S FIRST PRIMARY SOURCES

Completeness, to a collector of any sort, is one of those abstractions constantly aimed at, almost never attained. There is always that one unobtainable title, that recently discovered variant, standing in the way of possessing every item in a series or on a particular subject. With the acquisition by purchase of the Clements Library Associates of the excessively rare pamphlet, A Relation of The successfull beginnings of the Lord Baltimore’s Plantation in Maryland (1634), the Clements Library has attained one of the most elusive goals of its founder—the possession of each of the initial, first-hand printed narratives or descriptions of the colonies originally settled by the English within the present boundaries of the United States.

William L. Clements, although his chief fame rests with the remarkable manuscript sources for the Revolutionary War accumulated in the last years of his life, was primarily a book collector in the two decades culminating in the Library’s founding in 1923. He pretended to be neither an historian nor a bibliographer, but he built his collection with a degree of sophisticated expertise rarely matched in the annals of book collecting by combining three essential elements: the liberal but careful expenditure of funds; guidance of the three, unquestioned bibliographical experts in the field of Americana of the time—George P. Winship, Henry Stevens, and Lathrop C. Harper; and an unusual fund of shrewdness and hard-headed common sense.

In contrast to most collectors, who only gradually identify their major interests, Clements had quickly, clearly defined what he was, and what he was not interested in acquiring. The primary sources, particularly the contemporary, first-hand narratives by actual participants in events of historical importance, inspired him more than all else, none so much as the earliest accounts of European settlements. Fortunately for the Library, the period of his greatest collecting activity coincided with not only
those remarkable auctions of Americana, the Hoe, Huth, and Edgar sales, but also with the period when duplicates from Henry Huntington’s recently acquired libraries were being sold privately and at auction. Many American rarities which have never appeared on the market since changed hands between 1911 and 1920. The majority of the titles noted here were acquired at that time.

The English were the initial direct colonizers of seven of the present fifteen eastern states, although efforts to establish a colony in Maine in 1606-08 were ill-conceived and productive of no contemporary, printed, descriptive literature. Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire were largely colonized from Massachusetts rather than England, and New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, while British territories by the end of the seventeenth century, were initially colonized by the Dutch and Swedes, who did not publish contemporaneously any narratives of early settlement.

No attempt is being made here to suggest the primacy of contemporarily published accounts over manuscripts as sources of our knowledge of our colonial beginnings. Our knowledge of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay would be woefully lacking without the diaries of William Bradford or John Winthrop, Roanoke or Jamestown without William Strachie’s journal or the near contemporary sources preserved in print by Hakluyt and Purchas. The letters and documents collected and published by historical societies, archives, the Hakluyt Society, and in David Quinn’s recently issued New American World (Arno Press, 1979), have multiplied our knowledge of the colonizing efforts five-fold.

Collectors and historians of our early history, even into Clements’ era, lacking access to widely scattered manuscript sources, tended to overemphasize printed sources. On the other hand, “scientific” historians of our century have, perhaps, erred equally in overemphasizing manuscripts, or in viewing pamphlets as merely sources of information, rather than as the primary vehicles of transmitting news to the public before the rise of newspapers and periodicals. The publication of the earliest of the tracts discussed here had an informational importance almost impossible to appreciate in our print—and media—surfeited world of today. The first literature of colonization may have been promotional and self-serving, of very limited circulation by today’s standards, but it provided the first glimpses Europe had of America—the first documents at the very beginning of one of the most significant demographic transformations in recorded history, as well as the only precious, fleeting views we have of eastern American native life before the process of cultural assimilation and destruction had begun.
The very earliest intelligence of North America in English by an actual settler was issued in a rather unassuming pamphlet of 48 pages in 1588. Thomas Hariot, in *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia* (London, 1588), promised a second, historical narrative of the Roanoke colony, which never was published and has been lost. This work is entirely descriptive of the land, its fauna and flora, its native population, and its economic potential as a source of “merchantable” products. Hariot was a careful, largely accurate observer, who set high scientific standards rarely met in the colonial period. While the original pamphlet probably had limited circulation, existing today in only five known copies, it was reprinted by Hakluyt and Theodore De Bry and widely disseminated.

John Smith provided the world its view of the first permanent settlement at Jamestown in *A True Relation of such occurrences and accidents of noateas as hath hapned in Virginia* (London, 1608), published while he was yet in the colony. It is in the form of a relatively straightforward, detailed chronicle, but is imbued with the irrepressible personality of its author. Smith would rework and expand his account in his later publications, all of which are in the Library, but this first appearance in print of “Pocahuntus” and Powhatan and of place names that are richly ingrained in our nation’s historical fabric can hardly fail to raise the reader’s pulse with excitement.

The equivalent to Smith for the Pilgrims was provided in *A Relation or Journall of the beginning and proceedings of the English Plantation settled at Plimoth in New England* (London, 1622), or “Mourt’s Relation,” a work which, since the re-discovery of Bradford’s diary in the nineteenth century, has been to some degree slighted. As pure narrative, it is the best of the seventeenth-century colonization accounts to make its way into print. The much larger Puritan migration at the end of the decade, not having the same necessity of advertising for settlers, and possessing frequent communication with England, did not immediately produce any first-hand, contemporary, descriptive publication with the exception of Francis Higginson’s *New-Englands Plantation, or, A Short and True Description of the Commodities and Discommodities of that Countrey* (London, 1630). It follows the general format established by Hariot. Higginson, who died in the year the pamphlet was published, had emigrated to Salem in 1629.

Skipping chronologically over the Maryland settlement, William Hilton’s *A Relation of A Discovery lately made on the Coast of Florida* (London, 1664), in spite of its misleading title, deals largely with the Carolinas and was published to promote an abortive colony at Cape Fear. It is short, but highly readable, in the tradition of John Smith’s *True Relation*. The
earliest South Carolina pamphlet by an on-the-spot observer was Thomas Ash’s *Carolina; or a Description Of the Present State* . . . (London, 1682). It is a good description of the land and its semi-tropical products, in the Hariot-Higginson tradition.

The first contemporary Georgia publication is considered to be either the second issue of Benjamin Martyn’s *Reasons For Establishing the Colony of Georgia . . . Trade of Great Britain* (London, 1733), which contains an appended letter of Oglethorpe from Savannah, *An Extract of the Journal of Mr. Commissary Von Reck, who conducted the First Transport of Salzburgers to Georgia* (London, 1733), which deals only with a small segment of the population, or the relatively later, anonymous *A New Voyage to Georgia, by a Young Gentleman* (London, 1737). But the Anglo-American world had changed greatly by this time, with a fairly regular postal system, and with newspapers and magazines beginning to supplant the pamphlet as a source of news.

The tract recently acquired, *A Relation of The successfull beginnings of the Lord Baltimore’s Plantation in Mary-land* (London, 1634), is the rarest of all the colonization narratives, known in but the three copies at the British Library, the John Carter Brown, and the Clements. Until the Clements copy appeared at auction in 1983, none had changed hands since Henry Stevens sold it to Brown in the early 1840’s! Although anonymous, it was clearly written by Father Andrew White, who also left two variant manuscript texts which contain greater detail on the voyage but are inferior to the published version on settlement itself. White was the most “literary” of all the pamphleteers, and to quote Lawrence Wroth in *The Maryland Colonization Tracts, 1632-1646*:

“One finds in this narrative something of that sense of wonder and freshness that marks the best of the early writings on America. Its author is genuinely moved by the spiritual potentialities of the future in the new land, and, naive and sensitive to his physical surroundings, he seems to be sniffing the morning air and drinking in the beauty of a land where spring comes swift and urgent with promise.”

Mr. Wroth continued his remarks on the White pamphlet by saying that it “is something far indeed from the production of a London hack writer employed by a company promoter to string superlatives upon a slender thread of fact and incident.” It is this immediacy, this ebullient sense of adventure and discovery, which raises the best of the first-hand narratives above the generality of other “primary sources.” The Clements Library has the unique privilege among American collections of housing all of the ten publications mentioned here, sharing the honor world-wide only with the British Library. It is fitting that the Maryland pamphlet should come to us in the 350th year of that colony’s history.