Lyman C. Draper and Early American Archives

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WHEN applying for a position as paymaster — and incidentally historian and intelligence officer to the governor — to serve with the Wisconsin Volunteers after the outbreak of the Civil War, Lyman C. Draper, secretary of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, wrote to Governor Alexander W. Randall:

> It is doubtless known to you that during our war of Independence, Governor Jefferson & other governors, frequently dispatched to the main army, a special officer . . . to collect the most reliable intelligence of general army movements, and also to investigate and report the condition and wants of the troops of their respective States, & communicate fully & promptly to the Executive. . . . I learned much of these things in my examinations of the public archives at Richmond, at Washington, and elsewhere.[1]

This was one of the few instances in which Draper used the term "archives" in his writing. This rarity of usage should not imply that Draper was unfamiliar with archival materials. It was probably merely indicative of the undeveloped state of archival agencies, collections, and terminology in the United States during his lifetime. In the Federal Government most of the departments still retained their own files, although during the mid-nineteenth century the Library of Congress began to collect records from other Government agencies. Similarly some States had also begun to consider the preservation of their official documents and manuscript records, but in many cases the amount of care and organization of the papers depended upon the varying degrees of interest or apathy of State and county officeholders, for professional archivists were as yet unknown in North America.

As early as 1833 the 18-year old Draper had requested ex-President James Madison to send him an autobiographical sketch, and

[1] Letter dated April 23, 1861, Draper-Wisconsin Historical Society Correspondence. All letters cited hereafter are located in this manuscript collection in the Library of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. This correspondence is not a part of the Draper Collection of Manuscripts.

after the exchange of several letters the young man's persistence was rewarded with a brief account written by a member of Madison's family. Six years later the youthful historian had envisioned a plan for writing a series of biographical and historical studies about the heroic figures and events in the settlement of the early West beyond the Allegheny Mountains. He would portray accurately the exciting and adventurous lives of such frontier heroes as the famed Kentucky hunter, Daniel Boone; border scouts and spies, Simon Kenton, Samuel Brady, and Lewis Wetzel; the conqueror of the Old Northwest, George Rogers Clark; the "gamecock of South Carolina," Thomas Sumter; the courageous Mohawk chief, Joseph Brant; the distinguished Shawnee warrior and statesman, Tecumseh; and their many associates, friends and foes. From this plan Draper never departed.

In accordance with his aim he gathered the thousands of papers that constitute the Draper Collection of Manuscripts, bequeathed by him to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin at his death. Before he became in 1854 the first director of the Society, a position to which he devoted most of his time and energy until his retirement 32 years later, he had acquired the most significant portions of his collection, including nearly all of the original records that it contains. In 1857 he estimated that his collection comprised "some 10,000 foolscap pages of notes of the recollections of warrior-Pioneers, either written by themselves, or taken down from their own lips; and well nigh 5,000 pages more of original manuscript journals, memorandum books, and old letters written by nearly all the leading border heroes of the West." [2]

Many of these papers he had acquired by extensive travels in the 1840's through many of the States in the eastern and southern sections of the country. Journeying sometimes by wagon, by stage, by boat, or by train, but frequently on foot, he eagerly interviewed pioneers and their descendants, unearthed long forgotten records, and copied the manuscripts, newspapers, and printed documents of which he could not obtain the originals. Although not so productive of original manuscripts as were his earlier ventures, his several other excursions into the South after 1857 yielded additional papers. After his days of research trips were over, he could claim that his collection was "the systematic result of over 40 years labors & 60,000 miles of journeyings —." [3] Whatever discomforts he endured in his travel were more than compensated for by his

[2] Lyman C. Draper, circular letter, May 1, 1857.
[3] Draper to Charles McKnight, February 18, 1875.

elation at the discovery or acquisition of a valuable group of manuscripts or notes. During one southern tour he particularly rejoiced at the finding of the papers of William Fleming, commander of the Botetourt Regiment at the Battle of Point Pleasant, which had lain untouched but well preserved for nearly 50 years after Fleming's death.[4] A few days later he examined "2 or 3 bushels" of papers of William Cocke, Revolutionary militia captain near the present boundary of Virginia and Tennessee, but these had so deteriorated that Draper had difficulty in deciphering the parts he wished to copy.[5] When traveling, he worked assiduously at collecting, arranging, and transcribing, "seldom going to bed before 11 or 12 at night, & up early & at it before breakfast — ." [6] "It hasn't been a play-spell," [7] he exclaimed after spending each day from 8 o'clock in the morning until sundown copying documents in the New York State Library for nearly 2 weeks during November 1848.

On his research trips he utilized not only papers in private ownership but also those in existing Federal and State archives in the United States and in Canada. From the Canadian archives he acquired copies of papers of Daniel Claus, Sir William Johnson, George Clinton, and Philippe de Rocheblave. Additional papers of Johnson and Clinton, as well as transcripts of documents in London and Paris, he copied at the New York State Library at Albany. At Harrisburg he searched the Pennsylvania archives for material on the Revolution in the upper Ohio River Valley; at Richmond he found material pertaining to Virginia and neighboring regions. In Washington he spent a total of many weeks transcribing excerpts from the records of the Continental Congress, from the correspondence of Washington and Jefferson in the State Department, and from the military papers of William Henry Harrison in the War Department. At the Pension Office he copied hundreds of statements of military service filed by aged Revolutionary War veterans. He also visited courthouses in North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee to obtain copies of selected county records.

Moreover, in the period and area that Draper had chosen to study, the trans-Allegheny West from approximately 1740 to 1815, the dividing line between Government archives and private manuscripts may sometimes seem almost indistinguishable. Because few archival depositories were then organized in North America and

[4] Draper to Peter A. Remsen, August 17, 1844.
[5] Draper to Remsen, August 30, 1844.
[6] Draper to Remsen, August 17, 1844.
[7] Draper to Remsen, November 18, 1848.

because many of the western militia units in the Revolutionary War and in Indian border warfare were largely composed of citizen volunteers, the officers frequently retained their correspondence and military records among their personal papers. Because Draper himself conceived the history of western expansion to be primarily in terms of military events and of the actions of heroic pioneers, many of whom were soldiers, he attempted to gather the surviving papers of as many of these men as possible. In the Draper Collection, therefore, are manuscripts, usually military in nature, that might perhaps have been found in State and National archives if more such agencies had been organized in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

For the colonial period Draper found but few original papers. These include, among the papers of William Preston, the correspondence, muster rolls, receipts for pay and provisions, and court-martial records for the militia of Augusta County, Virginia, in the period from 1742 to 1764. A few military records for other counties of Virginia and Pennsylvania during the French and Indian War may also be found in the papers of Evan Shelby and of James Potter. Scattered elsewhere in the collection are petitions to William Tryon, royal governor of North Carolina, and a few letters and land warrants written by Lord Dunmore, royal governor of Virginia.

Most of the original manuscripts in the Draper Collection relate to the quarter-century from 1775 to 1800, marked by the Revolutionary War and by hostile disturbances with the Indians on the frontiers of American settlement. Draper gathered the extant papers of many of the western military leaders for this period. The largest in number as well as perhaps the most notable are the papers of George Rogers Clark. Later bound together with Draper's notes and correspondence about Clark into 64 large folio volumes, these include much of Clark's official incoming correspondence from his officers and military associates, drafts of many of his own letters, records of his famous Illinois Regiment, and some captured British correspondence and documents of Henry Hamilton. Draper acquired also the papers of several other leaders: William Preston, organizer of the expedition under Andrew Lewis which repelled the Indians at Point Pleasant in 1774 and participant in the negotiations with the Cherokee Indians in 1776-77; David Shepherd, county lieutenant of Ohio, who supervised the defense of a large frontier area both during and after the Revolution; William Croghan, who raised a company for the Eighth Virginia Regiment in 1776

and served throughout the Revolution; and Daniel Brodhead, colonel of the Eighth Pennsylvania Regiment and commandant at Fort Pitt during 1779-1781. Among smaller groups of manuscripts of border figures are those of Evan and Isaac Shelby, Arthur and William Campbell, Joseph Martin, William Harrod, James Potter, Thomas Sumter, John Sevier, Samuel Brady, and Richard Butler. Most of these groups, large and small, consist mainly of military records for the units in which these men served; included are militia orders, muster rolls, pay rolls, and accounts for food, lodging, clothing, and horses, as well as a wealth of correspondence from many of the officers who served along the frontiers from Pennsylvania to the Carolinas and westward to the Illinois country.

Much less numerous in the Draper Collection are records of the War of 1812. They include a book of general orders kept by Andrew Jackson's command from October to December 1813 and several small groups of papers of other participants: James Winchester, commander of the troops defeated at the River Raisin in 1813; Benjamin Whiteman, a general of the Ohio militia; Nathan Heald, commanding officer at Fort Dearborn until captured there in 1812; and Martin D. Hardin, major in the Kentucky militia serving under William Henry Harrison. The papers of Thomas Forsyth, Indian subagent for the Sauk and Fox Indians near Peoria, Illinois, contain a number of official letters from William Clark, Governor of Missouri Territory and superintendent of Indian affairs at St. Louis, and from Ninian Edwards, Territorial Governor of Illinois.

In the Draper Collection records of officials of civil government may be found; but frequently, as in the case of the letters of Governors Edwards and Clark, the papers pertain mainly to warfare, so closely were frontier military and civil affairs interwoven by troubles with the British and with the Indians. Besides Clark and Edwards, the executives of several other States and Territories are represented by correspondence in the collection: George Clinton of New York; Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, Edmund Randolph, and Henry Lee of Virginia; William Blount, John Sevier, and Willie Blount of Tennessee; Isaac Shelby of Kentucky; and Edward Tiffin and Thomas Kirker of Ohio. Of these the papers of Thomas Jefferson are among the most numerous and most interesting, totaling 28 original letters and 2 signed documents, in addition to contemporary copies of several other letters. Most of these are among the George Rogers Clark Papers, although Jefferson's correspondents included a number of other border leaders besides Clark —

Evan Shelby, Joseph Martin, John Todd, Thomas Walker, William Preston, David Shepherd, Daniel Smith, and Joseph Crockett. A dozen letters, dated from 1790 to 1792, from Henry Knox, Secretary of War, were addressed to David Shepherd and are preserved among his papers, as is also one letter from President Washington concerning a land claim. Original records of county officers number only a very few pieces: an account of sheriff's fees kept for Botetourt County, Virginia, in 1772; several official papers, 1754-1757, of John Potter, sheriff of Cumberland County, Virginia; and a small group of documents kept by Robert Patterson as sheriff of Fayette County, Kentucky, in 1787-1788, and as justice of the peace during 1796-1797.

Aside from a few periodical articles and one large volume, *King's Mountain and Its Heroes*, published in 1881, Draper's dream of writing a series of books on the history of the early West never materialized. His work as the successful organizer and promoter of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin left him little time for personal research and writing. He was further hampered by an exaggerated fear that he would produce books which might contain errors in detail or prove incomplete in some small respect. "I w[oul]d sooner starve, *or very nearly so*, than suffer anything to go out in a shiftless and imperfect manner," [8] he once declared after many years of study.

Draper urged the construction of a fireproof building for the library of the Wisconsin Historical Society.[9] He recognized that manuscripts are perishable, and that "important historical facts, narratives and documents are lost every year for want of proper foresight and care for their preservation." [10] Yet, in handling his own collection, Draper did not share the insistence of the modern archivist or manuscript specialist upon orderly arrangement and special treatment for aged and fragile papers. The vast number of manuscripts he had acquired seemed to make their organization too overwhelming a task for his meager spare time after he came to Wisconsin. Nevertheless, he could not refrain from continuing to augment his collection by additional correspondence on minute details. Even the Fleming Papers, which he had gathered in 1844, were unarranged more than 30 years later. By that time (1875) he had had about 100 volumes of manuscripts bound in accordance with

[8] Draper to McKnight, February 18, 1875.

[9] Draper to George Grimmer, September 15, 1881.

[10] Sixteenth Annual Report of the Executive Committee, 1870, *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, VI, p. 33.

the library practice of that time. He estimated that papers to fill another 30 or 40 volumes were nearly ready for the bindery, and the remaining material he believed would probably comprise between 50 and 100 more volumes.[11] When the State Historical Society received the collection 16 years later, very few additional manuscripts had been arranged or bound. Draper kept his personal library in a brick building to the rear of his Madison residence. There the papers were somewhat safeguarded against the danger of fire. After the great collector's death in 1891, however, it was discovered that the building was damp and infested with rodents, and that the unbound manuscripts were in a discouraging state of chaotic disorder.[12] The collection was soon moved to the State Historical Society, where the loose papers were studied, sorted, and bound to conform as closely as possible to Draper's intended scheme of arrangement whenever this could be discerned. As finally completed, the Draper Collection numbers 486 volumes divided among 50 series or subcollections, most of which are grouped around an individual, a subject, or a geographical area about which Draper had planned to write.

The manuscripts, both originals and copies, have proved to be a mine of valuable information for hundreds of authors and researchers since the Draper Collection was opened to public use nearly 60 years ago. The importance of the records in transcript should not be underestimated, for in many cases the originals that Draper copied have since been lost, dispersed, or destroyed by fire or war. Even small excerpts from county archives have been gratefully perused by later historians. In some instances, of course, the publications of State archives, such as those of Virginia, Pennsylvania, and other States, have superseded Draper's copies. The papers of Josiah Harmar, from which Harmar's descendants permitted Draper to make selected copies, have been fortunately acquired in the twentieth century by the William L. Clements Library. Yet numerous articles, histories, and biographies of such figures as George Rogers Clark, William Clark and Meriwether Lewis, Daniel Boone, James Harrod, and William Croghan, have been based in large measure upon the Draper Manuscripts. Countless military records and pieces of correspondence have been printed, some as individual items, some in collections of documents, some in historical and genealogical periodicals. To cite only two rather

[11] Draper to McKnight, February 18, 1875.

[12] Wisconsin Historical Society, *Proceedings* (39th Annual Meeting), 1891, pp. 36-37; (41st Annual Meeting), 1893, p. 35.

recent examples, several of the letters of William Blount, John Sevier, and James Robertson have been printed among the records of Southwest Territory in the fourth volume of the *Territorial Papers of the United States*, edited by Clarence E. Carter; the majority of Draper's letters of Thomas Jefferson have appeared in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* currently being published under direction of Julian P. Boyd at Princeton University.

Lyman C. Draper probably never considered himself an archivist, but through his study of western history he had close associations with the American archival depositories existing in the nineteenth century. To succeeding generations of historians interested in the early westward movement Draper rendered an incalculable service by searching for and preserving in his own library so many significant manuscripts, many of which may be considered closely related to or almost a part of the early military archives of the United States.