THE ROLE OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY IN CURRENT CULTURE

There are some who would divide humanity, like Gaul, into three parts: the “visionaries” whose interest is in the future, the “old-fogies” who concern themselves with the past, and the properly “practical” individuals whose attention is fixed on the current scene, and who have little patience and less time for unproductive excursions in either direction. This attitude, I submit, is neither constructive nor realistic, for the division is a fictitious one.

Actually, time is a continuous stream in which the past is constantly merging into the present and the present into the future. The boundaries of history are in constant flux, and its tide is always engulfing the moment we call “now” and lapping at the edge of the moment yet to come. Before we have had time to experience the present, much less to analyze it, it has become history.

In this rushing river of time, the past lives in the present and the present is implicit in the future. Thus to limit concern to any one of these unstable and merging divisions is to lose the meaning of the whole, and even of the particular segment chosen for study. The historian who does not see history in the perspective of all time, current actualities and future possibilities included, misses a true understanding of the past; and a “practical” citizen of the present who is insensitive to the past cannot see the present accurately nor act in it intelligently.

We as an Historical Society, dedicated to the understanding of the past, have a valuable contribution to make to current culture. As we preserve the relics of other days, we provide data by which our own generation can understand its meaning and judge its status. As we uncover forgotten facts we add to the sum of contemporary knowledge. As we re-create the mind of past days we influence the current flow of the stream of events and guide the course of the future.

It has been the universal history of the race that disinterest in the past is the inevitable prelude to loss of incentive in the present and promise for the future. As men are stimulated to remember, they are inspired to advance. As they are shown the blunders of the past they are given wisdom to plan that advance safely and successfully.

Thus it is the duty of our Society to hold up the past not only in an inspiring light, but also in an honest light. Inaccurate romancing that over-stresses the pleasant aspects of history and ignores its darker phases, idolatrous ancestor worship that substitutes emotion for reason and imagination for scholarship, “history” biased and beamed to a pre-conceived conclusion are as deplorable as any other form of common dishonesty, and no imprimatur of any historical society can make them respectable. It is not our function to criticize or “de-bunk”, but it is our duty to be objective. Our contribution to current culture must include inspiring our age by the challenge of the noble past, imparting the wisdom of the wise past, and displaying the warning of the misguided past.

To all these objectives we have done some service in the second year of the Society’s history. We have collected a number of valuable papers and relics which are safely preserved and available for study. We have publicized important phases of local history through our bulletin and our general meetings. We have, in concert with others, promoted a number of useful historical projects which are still in process. We have fostered the interest in historical matters in the community.

But much remains to be done. In the coming year, under new leadership, I am confident the Society will make a growing and most significant contribution to our time and our community.

—B. FRANK HALL, President.
ANNUAL MEETING

In accordance with the provisions of the Bylaws (Article VIII, Sec. 1), the annual meeting will be held on the second Wednesday in May, i.e., May 14, when a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and two directors will be elected (Articles IV and V).

Place and Time of Meeting

Wilmington College—8:00 p.m., May 14. Please keep this Bulletin, as no other notice of the meeting will be mailed you.

Speaker and Subject

Claude Howell, native Wilmingtonian and instructor in art at the Wilmington College will speak on The History of Art in Southeastern North Carolina.

Mr. Howell, whose paintings are widely known outside the State as well as within it, has studied in many places in the United States and received many awards and prizes. One of these, the Rosenwald Fellowship, permitted him to travel and study in Europe, also.

ECCE HOMO

This painting (Behold the Man), showing Christ before Pilate, hangs in St. James Episcopal Church in Wilmington, N. C. According to the records of St. James Church, it was taken from the cabin of the captain of one of three pirate ships that attacked the town of Brunswick on the west bank of the Cape Fear River, fourteen miles from Wilmington, in 1748. The ship was sunk in the engagement.

In 1751 the General Assembly of North Carolina gave the painting to St. James Church. Several experts have said that in their opinion the picture is in the Spanish tradition of the Sixteenth Century.
A CASUAL STUDY OF SEALS

The word "seal", Latin, "sigillum" is employed to describe both the implement for making the impression, and the impression itself. The practice of having official seals for communities, and States, is based on the early days of civilization and heraldry, when nations, families, and chieftains adopted distinguishing symbols for their coats of arms. Greek and Roman poets described the devices borne on the shields of heroes, and many such painted shields are pictured on antique vases. In the early days of Europe seals were in common use. Sovereigns had a great privy seal and signet, as well as seals for their courts and officials, with other seals for customs and staples. The great majority were circular in shape, though square and oval ones were quite numerous. Seals also were in use in China, Babylonia, and Assyria, as well as in Europe and elsewhere.

In 1817 an authority wrote:—"The design upon the seal of a city should be unique, that it may not resemble that borne by the seal of any other city. It should, if possible, be characteristic also, so that it would not fitly be borne by the seal of another city. For it is an enduring link between the past and the future. It may bear upon its face an epitome of the city's history, which it carries down to a remote posterity. While books perish and monuments crumble, the seal is among the most imperishable of memorials. Being multiplied in large numbers and in a variety of lasting material, a design perpetuated in this form is well nigh indestructible. Thus we have seals which time has spared us from the earliest civilizations, and collections of such works, commemorating eminent men and great events, form a most valuable chapter in the history of civic progress as well as of art."  

States Have Followed Custom

The ancient customs have been followed by the various States of the Union, counties, and municipalities, among which number North Carolina stands out prominently.

North Carolina's Seal

The use of a Great Seal for the attestation of important documents began with the institution of government in North Carolina. At times there have been nine different seals in use in the Colony and the State. The Constitution, Article III, section 16, requires that—"There shall be a seal of the State which shall be kept by the Governor, and used by him as occasion may require, and shall be called 'The Great Seal of the State of North Carolina'. All grants and Commissions shall be issued in the name, and by the authority of the State of North Carolina, sealed with 'The Great Seal of the State', signed by the Governor and countersigned by the Secretary of State.”

Description of the State Seal

The present Great Seal of the State is described as follows:—"It is two and one-quarter inches in diameter, and its design is a representation of the figures of Liberty and Plenty, looking toward each other, but not more than half fronting each other, and otherwise disposed, as follows:—Liberty, the first figure, standing, her pole with cap on it in her left hand and a scroll with the word 'Constitution' inscribed thereon in her right hand. Plenty, the second figure, sitting down, her right arm half extended toward Liberty, three heads of wheat in her right hand, and in her left the small end of her horn, the mouth of which is resting at her feet, and the contents of the horn rolling out. In the exergon is inserted the words 'May 20, 1775', above the coat of arms. Around the circumference is the legend 'The Great Seal of the State of North Carolina', and the motto—'Esse Quam Videre' (To Be Rather Than To Seem)".

Wilmington's Seal

There can hardly be any doubt that from earliest times Wilmington possessed an official seal. The first charter was taken out in 1739 but municipal legislative action did not transpire until 1866, when the present seal was proposed and prepared. It is regrettable that no trace of a seal used locally prior to 1866 now can be found.

Confirmation of the statements which follow may be found in the official minutes of the years mentioned, of the city government.

In 1949 the present Chairman of the New Hanover Historical Commission appeared before the City Council. He pointed out that a charter was granted the town of Wilmington in 1739, and stressed that there existed a span of 127 years of existence prior to the current seal, which disclosed that the city was incorporated in 1866. It was suggested to the City Council that what might have happened in 1866 was that the original seal of the town could not be found, or, if in existence that the legend thereon
may have been displeasing to the then “Carpetbag” regime, following The War Between the States, then in control of the city, as well as of the State, and the South. Undoubtedly, it was necessary for the local authorities to obtain an amendment to the original charter, and thus, in doing so the seal was made to conform with the date of the amended charter, 1866.

The above presentation, and request for substitution on the seal of the year “1739” for that of “1866” was received sympathetically, and favorably, by the City Council. However, the City Attorney then expressed the opinion that legislative authorization would be necessary for the proposed change of dates. So, after a wait of two years, in January of 1951, before the legislature convened, the Historical Commission Chairman again approached the City Council relative to the desired change. This time the City Attorney ruled, and stated, that after study and investigation he had changed his mind and now considered it unnecessary to appeal for legislative action. He advised the Council it was within their province that the suggested and desired change of date be shown on the seal. Formal decision to take this action was then recorded in the Spring of 1951. Since that time the year “1739”, (as is proper), appears on the seal of the municipality, instead of the incorrect and misleading year, “1866”.

Under the present city charter it is required that the seal shall be circular in shape, and is described as follows:—“In the center is a hive located on a stand, built at the water’s edge, about and around which bees are at work; partly encircling this hive is vegetation; immediately below the platform is the date, 1739; above the hive the word ‘Persevere’, and encircling the border are the words ‘City of Wilmington’—‘State of North Carolina.’”

—LOUIS T. MOORE, Chairman,
New Hanover Historical Commission.

We are deeply grateful to Mr. Moore for his excellent article. It is only one of the many services he has rendered our community both as a native and an official of our County.—Ed.