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Documents and Archives in Early America

RANDALL C. JIMERSON

RÉSUMÉ L'intérêt pour les documents d'archives en Amérique est né de motifs religieux et d'une préoccupation pour les droits des colons. Vers la fin du 18^e siècle, les historiens s'appuyaient de plus en plus sur les documents originaux pour établir les faits et la vérité « objective ». À partir de la Révolution, les documents historiques servaient des buts patriotiques et nationalistes, comme le culte des héros. Deux traditions différentes mais complémentaires résultent des efforts pour préserver les documents jugés irremplaçables : la multiplication de copies par l'édition et la publication, et l'établissement de dépôts afin de protéger les documents originaux. On assiste alors au début de la conscience archivistique en Amérique, menée par des sociétés historiques privées. Les archives servent alors les besoins de l'élite sociale et confirment leur pouvoir.

ABSTRACT Concern for documents and archival records in America began with religious motives and concern for colonists' rights. By the late 18th century historians increasingly relied on original documents to establish facts and "objective" truth. Beginning with the Revolution historical documents served patriotic and nationalistic purposes, such as veneration of heroes. Efforts to preserve irreplaceable documents resulted in two separate but closely linked traditions – "multiplying the copies" through documentary editing and publication, and establishing repositories to protect original documents. This marked the beginning of archival consciousness in America, led by private historical societies. Archives served the needs of the social elite and confirmed their power.

Introduction

The American people have always had an ambivalent relationship to their history. Founded in part on the notion of escape from the shackles of European traditions and with the vision of being a "city on the hill" for a utopian new world, the United States has been future-oriented and hostile to historical consciousness. Alexis de Tocqueville articulated the problem of Americans' fickle concern for their history in the 1830s. He concluded, "no one cares for what occurred before his time," and observed, "no archives are formed; and no documents are brought together when it would be easy to do so. Where

they exist, little store is set upon them.”¹ However, George Bancroft, the most prominent American historian of the nineteenth century, wrote in 1838 that New Englanders “have always been a documentary people.”² The colonial era in New England witnessed the early stages of historical consciousness and of concern for creating and preserving historical documents. Although the first historical society in the United States was established in 1791, not until 1901 did any of the states establish a public archives, and the National Archives did not achieve a permanent home until the 1930s.

The early development of archival consciousness in the United States illustrates the power of documents and their importance in establishing national identity and securing the authority of the ruling elite. For early Americans, documents represented both tangible evidence of the past and proof of actions and events. Above all, they conveyed seemingly irrefutable facts. This positivist assertion of objective truth provided the underlying support for accepting documents as historical evidence. Although occasionally regarded in a legal sense, more often this use of evidence conveyed historical legitimacy to political and cultural narratives of the nation’s founding and development.

Two distinct approaches to preserving documents for researchers began to emerge by the time of the Revolution. In 1774 Ebenezer Hazard began to collect American documentary sources for publication, and Jeremy Belknap requested Harvard College to collect documents relating to the revolutionary crisis for use by future historians. These two approaches to resolving the same problems represent what would become two separate traditions in American documentary preservation. Hazard and his heirs, the documentary editors, followed Jefferson’s admonition to “multiply the copies” rather than trust locks and vaults to protect irreplaceable documents. Belknap and his heirs, both manuscript curators and archivists, sought first to preserve and protect the original documents by establishing secure repositories with increasingly sophisticated methods for protection and conservation of endangered primary sources. That these two traditions are complementary, not mutually exclusive or conflicting, can be seen by the close personal friendship that developed between their intellectual progenitors, Hazard and Belknap. Not only did they establish a close friendship; they shared each other’s concerns for documentary publication and archival repositories. By tracing the origins of this concern for historical documents, we can see the emergence of archival consciousness in the early years of American national history.

1 Quoted in T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, 1956), p. 33.

2 Michael Kraus, *A History of American History* (New York, 1937), p. 171.

Jeremy Belknap

Jeremy Belknap was the first American historian to write “objective” history based on exhaustive research in primary sources, critical analysis of evidence, and rejection of the supernatural or divine explanations for historical causation.³ In order to correct the “frequently erroneous” statements of previous historical writers, he carefully researched “original records and other manuscripts” for his *History of New Hampshire* (3 volumes, 1784–1792).⁴ Belknap believed that reliance on documents ensured truth and authenticity.

Born in June 1744, Jeremy Belknap traced his ancestry to the first wave of Puritan migration in 1637. Belknap came naturally to an interest in history, for he grew up under the influence of Reverend William Prince. “The late accurate and indefatigable Mr. Prince, of Boston, (under whose ministry the author was educated, and whose memory he shall always revere)” Belknap wrote, had started him on his life-long quest and provided a model for the historian and collector of documents.⁵ Like Prince, Belknap developed a keen interest in the history of New England, an obsession for factual accuracy, and a remarkable zeal for searching out, using, and preserving original sources.⁶

Before embarking on his own career as an historian, however, Belknap graduated from Harvard College in 1762 and taught school for several years. In 1767 he was ordained as pastor of the First Parish in Dover, New Hampshire. The following June he married Ruth Eliot of Boston, and eventually had a family of six children. With the unreliable salary of a Congregational clergyman in a small town, Belknap remained relatively impoverished, unable to devote as much time as he desired to historical pursuits. He entered into long disputes with the parishioners over religious doctrine, church policies, and finances. The intellectual minister regarded his Dover neighbours as uncultivated and boorish, and complained of the “quiet desperation” of being marooned in this sleepy backwater. The parishioners, on their part, claimed that Belknap was a dull preacher, too intellectual and scholarly, who possessed a haughty manner.⁷

Despite his unhappy clerical position, Belknap became fascinated with the history and geography of his adopted state, and in 1784 published the first volume of *History of New Hampshire*, which would later grow to three volumes. After years of controversy, the depreciation of the currency in the 1780s and the inadequacy of his salary led him to resign his position in 1786. The fol-

3 Louis Leonard Tucker, *Clio's Consort: Jeremy Belknap and the Founding of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (Boston, 1989), pp. 39–40.

4 Jeremy Belknap, *History of New Hampshire* Volume I (New York, 1970), viii.

5 *Ibid.*, vii.

6 Tucker, *Clio's Consort*, pp. 34–35.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 4–12.

lowing year he became minister of Long Lane Church in Boston, and welcomed the return to a more cultivated environment where he hoped to have more time and opportunity to pursue his historical and literary interests. In Boston he was able to fulfill these aspirations, first by gaining a strong reputation as a historian and later by founding the Massachusetts Historical Society. Belknap continued as pastor of Long Lane Church until his death in June 1798 at the age of fifty-four.⁸

Belknap was not a cloistered man of God but an activist in socio-political reform, committed to linking his religious views to the swirling political issues of the tumultuous age in which he lived. During the Revolution he became “a pioneer nationalist” and “a rabid rebel,” according to later biographers. Following the Boston Tea Party he frequently attacked the British, both from the pulpit and in the press. Although forced by poor health and family obligations to decline a request to serve as chaplain to New Hampshire troops, he did manage to travel to Cambridge to preach to the patriot troops besieging Boston.⁹ In addition to these nationalist sentiments, Belknap took an active interest in anti-slavery activities, including abolition of the slave trade, and conducted research on slavery in Massachusetts.¹⁰

As a historian, Jeremy Belknap displayed a remarkably modernist approach, writing “objective” history based on exhaustive research in primary sources, critical analysis of evidence, and rejection of the supernatural or divine explanations for historical causation.¹¹ In the preface to the first volume of his *History of New Hampshire*, published in 1784, Belknap explained his purpose and his research methods. “The compiler of this history was early impelled by his natural curiosity to inquire into the original settlement, progress, and improvement of the country which gave him birth,” he explained. “Having met with some valuable manuscripts which were but little known, he began to extract and methodise the principal things in them; and this employment was (to speak in the style of a celebrated modern author) his ‘hobby horse’.” Belknap consulted both government records and personal manuscripts. He gratefully acknowledged the assistance of public officers in both New Hampshire and Massachusetts for allowing him “the use of the public records or extracts from them,” as well as private gentlemen, “who have either admitted him to their own collections of original papers or procured

8 Jeremy Belknap, “The Belknap Papers (Continued), Part III,” *MHS Collections*, 6th Series, vol. IV (1891), xv-xvi; Tucker, *Clio's Consort*, p. 25.

9 Charles Cole, “Jeremy Belknap: Pioneer Nationalist,” *New England Quarterly* 10 (1937), pp. 743–51; Tucker, *Clio's Consort*, pp. 30–31.

10 Belknap published a socio-historical account, “Slavery in Massachusetts,” in the *MHS Collections*; regarding his anti-slavery convictions; see Belknap to Thomas Arnold, 18 August 1789, Jeremy Belknap Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society [hereafter Belknap Papers, MHS].

11 Tucker, *Clio's Consort*, pp. 39–40.

such for him.” In his research he recognized the difficulty of preserving documents, and frequently lamented “the loss of many valuable materials by fire and other accidents”:

But what has pained him more severely, is the inattention of some persons, in whose hands original papers have been deposited, and who have suffered them to be wasted and destroyed as things of no value. The very great utility of a public repository for such papers, under proper regulations, has appeared to him in the strongest light, and he is persuaded that it is an object worthy of the attention of an enlightened legislature.¹²

As evidence of this, he cited the losses suffered by the valuable collections amassed by Reverend Thomas Prince, that he had used “before the commencement of the late war.” In 1775 British troops using the Old South Church had scattered or destroyed many of the valuable Prince collections, Belknap alleged, and “the friends of science and of America must deplore the irretrievable loss.”¹³ Such losses touched Belknap both through his personal veneration for his late mentor and from his belief that primary sources possessed the key to unlocking the truth of history and to preserving a record of the development of America and the deeds of national heroes.

Belknap clearly delineated his research methods. In order to correct misstatements by previous historical writers, whose accounts were “frequently erroneous,” he followed some of the hints that they had given, “which, by the help of original records and other manuscripts, have, in this work, been carefully and largely pursued.” Marginal notes clearly cited the “authorities from which information is derived,” in order to allow readers to verify his own statements. When no written sources could be found, Belknap vowed, he had relied on “the most authentic tradition,” but had scrupulously compared such accounts and had taken “proper allowance for the imperfection of human memory.” Such oral testimony could be used, but only with careful evaluation. Thus Belknap clearly privileged written records as more reliable testimony than memory. He also refused to fill gaps in the records and verifiable testimony, because it would be improper to employ “the help of imagination and conjecture” in this work of history. Finally, Belknap concluded, the historian had an obligation to interpret the past, not merely to chronicle events. “The writer has had it in view not barely to relate facts, but to delineate the characters, the passions, the interests and tempers of the persons who are the subject of his narration, and to describe the most striking features of the times in which they lived.”¹⁴ In his commitment to truth, his rejection of conjecture

12 Belknap, *History of New Hampshire*, Volume 1, vii.

13 *Ibid.*, vii–viii.

14 *Ibid.*, viii.

and speculation, and his reliance on primary sources, Jeremy Belknap represents an emerging recognition of the main elements of the modern historical method.

Belknap confirmed his belief in the importance of original sources by including an appendix in the first volume of his *History of New Hampshire* that included forty-eight documents and letters dating from 1629 to 1703, printed from manuscripts he located in his research. The second and third volumes of the *History*, published in 1791 and 1792, also included printed copies of original documents and letters. These primary sources served to substantiate his factual statements and interpretations, as well as to add a sense of authenticity and colourful illustrations to his narrative.

Documents represented both tangible evidence of the past and proof of actions and events. Above all they conveyed seemingly irrefutable facts. This positivist assertion of objective truth provided the underlying support for accepting documents as historical evidence.¹⁵ The necessity of citing authorities only gradually gained acceptance. One revolutionary general asked Jeremy Belknap not to quote from his letters. "It cannot be important to the world to know when or where you collected them," he wrote. "The only important question is are they facts."¹⁶ This argument that a presumed objective truth would not require proof and authorities was slowly giving way to historical documentation.¹⁷

In his personal correspondence, Belknap further explained his research methods and his dependence on original documents. In his indefatigable research efforts, Belknap sought "to learn what I can from printed books and manuscripts, and the information of aged and intelligent persons, of the former state and affairs of this town and province."¹⁸ Without access to a research library, Belknap relied on writing letters to descendants of early leaders, such as Cotton Mather, and to travelling throughout the state to find useful sources. He acquired whatever documents or printed materials he could obtain, sometimes borrowing family letters or requesting transcripts or extracts. He diligently searched public offices for useful sources, seeking to glean whatever information might be useful to establish facts or illustrate personalities and events. As he explained to fellow historian Ebenezer Hazard, "For while any source is unexplored, or unattempted – I shall not think my business done."¹⁹ Searching for documents provided adventure and intellectual challenge for the clergyman, whose ministerial duties in a small New Hampshire town provided few satisfactions. Belknap sought out opportunities

15 Tucker, *Clio's Consort*, pp. 32–33; Kraus, *A History of American History*, p. 87.

16 General Lincoln to Jeremy Belknap, 21 January 1792, Belknap Papers, MHS.

17 George H. Callcott, *History in the United States, 1800–1860* (Baltimore, 1970), pp. 5–6.

18 Tucker, *Clio's Consort*, p. 28.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

to travel around the state, and spent many happy hours in public records offices and “in the garrets and rat-holes of old houses.”²⁰ His zeal for manuscripts was nearly an obsession. “Yesterday I was rummaging some old pamphlets (an amusement which is to me what the opening a mine is to some other people),” he gleefully wrote to Hazard in 1787.²¹ His appetite for documents was insatiable. As he had professed in 1783, “I am willing even to scrape a dunghill, if I may find a jewel at the bottom.”²²

Before resorting to dunghills, Belknap engaged in an extensive correspondence with ministers and other men of learning throughout New Hampshire, seeking to uncover original documents or sources of private information. Copying William Prince, he distributed printed circulars to the “several Clergymen, and other gentlemen of public character,” asking numerous questions about the settlement, memorable events, institutions, people, topography, and natural history of each town. In addition to seeking documents, Belknap used what modern researchers refer to as oral history techniques, interviewing “aged and intelligent” residents and “many persons who have been employed in surveying, masting, hunting and scouting; as well as in husbandry, manufactures, merchandise, navigation and fishery.”²³ This oral history method supplemented the information gained from documentary research and from his printed circulars.

In sending out these questionnaires, he did not hesitate to write to high-ranking government officials. He maintained a long personal correspondence with colonial Governor John Wentworth, writing to him in 1774 asking assistance in searching the public records and in contacting descendants of former governors to request “any papers or anecdotes” which they might have. “Characters of ye principal persons yt have figured in the Province will be an essential part” of his proposed history of New Hampshire, Belknap told the governor.²⁴ Despite their clashing political views, Belknap even resumed the correspondence after the Revolution, when the Tory Wentworth had moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Soliciting documents for the second volume of his history of New Hampshire, Belknap wrote to Wentworth in 1791, asking for assistance. “I have endeavoured to explore every ... intelligence that is accessible & have succeeded in some Instances beyond my Expectation – nor would I leave any method unattempted by w’ch it is possible for me to obtain

20 Louis Leonard Tucker, *The Massachusetts Historical Society: A Bicentennial History 1791–1991* (Boston, 1996), p. 3.

21 Belknap to Hazard, 14 March 1787, “Correspondence Between Jeremy Belknap and Ebenezer Hazard, Part II.” *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Volume 43, Massachusetts Historical Society, 1877 [hereafter: MHS Collections], p. 295.

22 Belknap to Hazard, 8 January 1783, MHS Collections, Volume 43m, p. 178.

23 Tucker, *Massachusetts Historical Society*, pp. 3–4.

24 Jeremy Belknap to John Wentworth, 15 March 1774, “Belknap Papers,” MHS Collections (1891), pp. 48–49; Tucker, *Clio’s Consort*, pp. 49–50.

as complete a knowledge as possible of the persons & things concerning w^h I write,” he vowed. He then listed the documentary sources he had acquired for the period of Wentworth’s governorship. “With these – & what I shall collect from the public Records in N H whither I am now going to complete my Compilations & what I remember of the Transactions of that Period I shall form ye Chapter of your administration,” Belknap wrote. “But I do most sincerely wish that I could converse with you on some of these various topics because it is my intention & desire to give as candid an acc[ount] of things as is consistent with truth.”²⁵

Wentworth freely consented to the request for assistance. “I have herewith sent you the papers you desire, as far as I can find them,” he replied. “Most of my papers were destroyed during the late tumults; both public & private were at several times burned – their loss has been often very inconvenient to me since, and is now particularly regretted as they might have been useful to you. However all that remain, I confide to your friendly discretion which will readily suggest the great caution necessary, that these communications should not appear to be from me.”²⁶ It is remarkable testimony to the power of friendship that these two men could retain their mutual respect despite the intervention of a long and often bitter revolutionary struggle that had placed them not only on opposite sides but in separate countries.

Belknap also developed close contacts with the revolutionary leaders, and assumed that even leading government officials would accept his requests for aid in his research endeavours. Seeking information for his second volume on New Hampshire, Belknap wrote to Vice President John Adams in March, 1790. “By your indulgence in permitting me to ask you Questions, I am emboldened to send you one of my circular Letters by which you may see that I intend to leave no practicable source of information unexplored – if it should be in your power to suggest any thing relative to either of the topics mentioned I should be happy in the communication,” he wrote. Belknap further hoped that Adams might know how he could obtain information from the British government colonial office, that English historian George Chalmers cited in his works. In 1789, Belknap had written to Adams, lamenting the difficulty of examining Chalmers’s sources: “When I observe his [Chalmers] having had access to the papers in the Plantation Office, I feel a regret that an Ocean separates me from such a grand repository – how necessary to form a just judgment of the great springs of many American transactions!” Now he had a possible solution to this difficulty, on which he hoped Adams could advise him: “There are doubtless many [records] w^h might serve mine but I cannot make a Voyage to Europe. Can you tell me, Sir, whether that Office is under such regulations as that *an American* might be permitted to search it? & if it is do you know of any Person

25 Jeremy Belknap to “Gov. Wentworth at Halifax,” 21 March 1791, Belknap Papers, MHS.

26 Gov. Wentworth to Jeremy Belknap, 15 May 1791, Belknap Papers, MHS.

who might be employed for the purpose? and do you think it could be done without any considerable expence?"²⁷ In this bold request, Belknap acknowledged both the importance of British records for research in American history and the difficulty faced by an American in gaining access to such essential sources. It would be more than a generation later before any American researchers would achieve success in gaining such access.

Belknap followed this request to Adams with a letter to President George Washington. Having received "from under your hand, and afterward from your Mouth an approbation of the first Vol of my history of New Hampshire," Belknap felt emboldened to ask the Chief Executive for assistance. "In searching for materials of information respecting the Controversy between N. Hampshire & Vermont toward the close of the late War, I have learned that some Letters written by your Excellency to the Vermonters were very influential to restore order & prevent that Controversy from being carried to the length which many people wished & many others feared," he wrote to Washington. "These Letters must contain arguments with which the historian of that period ought to be acquainted, & I do therefore request your Excellency to favour me with such Copies or abstracts of them, & such other remarks as you may think proper for my purpose."²⁸ Unfortunately, there is no indication whether Washington responded to this request, although he did write to congratulate Belknap on one of his later publications.

Testimony to Belknap's skills as a historian also came from David Ramsay of South Carolina, one of the most popular historical writers of the late eighteenth century. "If all the existing records either in print or manuscript which respect the first settlement of Carolina were collected together in hands of ingenious men who would devote their time to elucidate our early history," Ramsay wrote to Belknap in 1792, "it would be impossible for them to give such a particular and interesting narrative as you have done in your three volumes containing the history of New Hampshire." Ramsay saw Belknap's approach to local history as one that could be followed in other states. "I wish such men could be found who would take equal pains in writing the history of each state," he told Belknap.²⁹ In the new nation a community of historical scholars, small and dispersed as it was, had begun to form. Jeremy Belknap became one of its leaders. As poet William Cullen Bryant later testified, Belknap's *History of New Hampshire* had "the high merit of being the first to make American history attractive."³⁰

27 Jeremy Belknap, "Copy to J. A.," 10 March 1790, Belknap Papers, MHS; Belknap to John Adams, 18 July 1789, quoted in Tucker, *Clio's Consort*, p. 59.

28 Jeremy Belknap to George Washington, 25 October 1790, Belknap Papers, MHS.

29 David Ramsay to Jeremy Belknap, 11 August 1792, quoted in Tucker, *Clio's Consort*, pp. 37–38, note 33.

30 Bryant, quoted in Walter Muir Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies* (Boston, 1962), p. 3.

Ebenezer Hazard

Ebenezer Hazard became the first historical editor in America attempting to preserve the nation's documentary heritage through publication of important records. In doing so he laid the foundation for later generations of researchers, who used his works extensively for nearly a century.³¹ Hazard was a member of one of the old families of Philadelphia, his ancestor having settled in America in 1636, a year before the first Belknap arrived in New England. Born in January 1744, five months before Jeremy Belknap, Ebenezer Hazard graduated from Princeton in 1762. His father and grandfather were merchants, so Hazard followed their example and entered business. From 1769 to 1775 he worked as a publisher and bookseller in New York, before entering the postal service as a surveyor of post roads, just as the American Revolution was commencing. Under the Confederation, Hazard served as United States Postmaster General from 1782 to 1789, before being forced out of office. He then returned to Philadelphia and became a founder and first secretary of the United States Tontine, an association of merchants for mutual assurance, which later became Insurance Company of North America. He also became manager of the Schuylkill Bridge Company and the Delaware & Schuylkill Canal Company. Hazard was an elder of the Presbyterian Church, and became a member of the American Philosophical Society and a fellow of the Academy of Natural Sciences. He died June 13, 1817 in Philadelphia.³² He was thus a well-educated, cultivated businessman with good family and political connections.

As a young New York publisher, Ebenezer Hazard recognized the importance of laying "the Foundation of a good American History," as he later explained.³³ In the summer of 1774, just as the revolutionary crisis was about to explode, Hazard issued a circular announcing his plans to compile five volumes of "American State Papers," which would present to the public "every important public Paper (such as Royal Grants, Acts of Parliament, &c. &c.) relating to America, of which either the original, or authentic Copies can be procured," from the early explorations of the Cabots "down to the present time." He requested "Gentlemen who are possessed of proper Materials for the Purpose ... to favour him with the Use of them."³⁴ This was an ambitious proposal for a young man. "I wish to be the means of saving from oblivion many important papers which without something like this collection will

31 Fred Shelley, "Ebenezer Hazard: America's First Historical Editor," *William and Mary Quarterly* 12, 3d series (January 1955), pp. 44–45.

32 Charles Deane, "Prefatory Note," MHS Collections, vol. 43; Hazard entry in *Dictionary of American Biography*, vol. 8 (New York, 1932), pp. 469–70.

33 Lester J. Cappon, "American Historical Editors Before Jared Sparks: 'they will plant a forest ...,'" *William and Mary Quarterly* 30, 3rd series (July 1973), p. 380.

34 Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies*, p. 4.

infallibly be lost,” Hazard explained to Jonathan Trumbull in August 1774. Some of the papers he proposed to collect would be “intimately connected with the liberties of the people,” while others would be valuable for future historians. “The time will doubtless come when early periods of American history will be eagerly inquired into, and it is the duty of every generation to hand to its successor the necessary means of acquiring such knowledge, in order to prevent their groping in the dark, and perplexing themselves in the labyrinths of error.”³⁵ In this eloquent passage Hazard acknowledged the significance of public records both for protecting the rights of citizens and also for providing historical source materials. He concluded by asserting the value of historical knowledge in combating ignorance and preventing repetition of past mistakes.

Hazard paid a personal visit to John Adams, who was travelling to Philadelphia as a Massachusetts delegate to the First Continental Congress. “Mr. Ebenezer Hazard waited on me with a letter, requesting my assistance in making his collection of American State papers,” Adams recorded in his diary on 23 August 1774. Adams recommended that Hazard contact Samuel Adams and Dr. Samuel Mather, and also recommended that he include Richard Hakluyt’s account of the voyage of Sebastian Cabot in his collection. “He thought it good advice,” Adams proudly declared. “Hazard is certainly very capable of the business he has undertaken; he is a genius.”³⁶ He also knew how to flatter the distinguished political leaders whose assistance he requested.

Another revolutionary leader who responded enthusiastically to Hazard’s circular letter was Thomas Jefferson, future author of the *Declaration of Independence*, who was just then emerging as a national figure. Jefferson sent Hazard a list of more than seventy items for inclusion. “It is an undertaking of great utility to the continent in general,” Jefferson declared in April 1775, for administrators as well as historians, and “will furnish to any historical genius which may happen to arise those materials which he would otherwise acquire with great difficulty and perhaps not acquire at all. Anything in my power I will most gladly contribute to the compilation.”³⁷

Hazard began gathering materials for his collections, but could only devote spare moments, under strained conditions, after working hours. This would be a labour of love, but one consummated only intermittently as time allowed. Within a few years, the “magnitude of my present design” had begun to overwhelm him. No outside observer, he told Jeremy Belknap, could comprehend “that amazing collection from whence my materials are to be extracted.” The grand scope of his design seemed daunting, he confided, and, “had I known at

35 Shelley, “Ebenezer Hazard: America’s First Historical Editor,” p. 48.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

37 Lester J. Cappon, “American Historical Editors Before Jared Sparks,” p. 381.

first what I was undertaking, I would not have enrolled my name in the list of American Antiquarians.”³⁸

The outbreak of war postponed Hazard’s project, but in 1778 he sought assistance from the Continental Congress for his proposed publication. In his appeal to Congress, Hazard stated that defence of the patriot cause would depend on evidence supplied by documents, such as royal charters and legislative journals, and that in order to prepare an American account of these momentous times historians would need access to such materials, both public records and personal papers.³⁹ He appealed to patriotic motives, stating that “gratitude to heaven and to our virtuous fathers, justice to ourselves, and a becoming regard to posterity” all required preserving these essential documents “before time and accident deprive us of the means.” The work was too great for one man working without assistance, he declared, since “so numerous are the materials, and so much dispersed, that a whole life would be insufficient to complete it” under these circumstances. Congress endorsed this proposal, and recommended that governors and executives in each state permit him to examine public records and provide him with copies of the most important papers. Congress also authorized “one thousand dollars” for Hazard’s expenses, although there is no record of such financial assistance ever reaching him. Amid the swirling events of the Revolution and its aftermath, support for Hazard’s historical project could not command adequate attention and publication did not commence until more than a decade later. However, as historian Fred Shelley points out, “The value of the resolution of Congress [in 1778] lay, of course, in the recognition by the national government of its responsibility and duty in making archives and historical manuscripts safe and available and in financing their publication.”⁴⁰ At the same time that it was making arrangements to maintain accurate records of its own deliberations, Congress also acknowledged the importance of older public records. However, a pattern of endorsing archival goals without providing adequate support for them also began with this early congressional action. This pattern played itself out over and over again in the subsequent two centuries.

When Hazard renewed his publication efforts in 1791, Thomas Jefferson once again embraced his proposal. In doing so, Jefferson issued a manifesto for historical editing and publication of America’s most significant documents and records. “I learn with great satisfaction that you are about committing to the Press the valuable Historical and State Papers you have been so long collecting,” Jefferson, now secretary of state, wrote to Hazard in February 1791. “Time and accident are committing daily havoc on the originals deposited in

38 Shelley, “Ebenezer Hazard,” pp. 51–52.

39 David D. Van Tassel, *Recording America’s Past: An Interpretation of the Development of Historical Studies in America 1607–1884* (Chicago, 1960), pp. 32–33.

40 Shelley, “Ebenezer Hazard,” pp. 55, 58.

our public offices; the late war has done the work of centuries in this business; the lost cannot be recovered; but let us save what remains; not by vaults and locks, which fence them from the public eye and use in consigning them to the waste of time, but by such a multiplication of Copies as shall place them beyond the reach of accident.”⁴¹ Recognizing the difficulty of preserving fragile and unique documents, as well as the importance of making records readily accessible to the citizens of the new republic, Jefferson endorsed Hazard’s plan to collect and publish these important materials. “Multiplication of Copies” became the watchword of the emerging contingents of historical editors and publishers.

During his extensive travels through New England as surveyor of the post roads, Hazard had found many opportunities to obtain copies of public records. Constrained from pursuing such research while serving as postmaster general in Philadelphia, he resumed the work earnestly in 1789. His grand work, *Historical Collections: Consisting of State Papers and Other Authentic Documents; Intended as Material for An History of the United States of America*, was published in two volumes in 1792 and 1794. The title tells it all: this would be a compendium of public records, which could be authenticated as reliable sources. It would be a vast resource on which future historians could draw in order to interpret the grand history of the young nation. Presented chronologically, these charters, royal instructions, and other public records covered the period from 1492 to 1656. Hazard declared that the sources he compiled “will, of themselves, form the best history that can be published, as they will furnish facts free from the glosses of commentators.” Despite this appeal, the two volumes did not sell well enough to meet publishing costs, and Hazard had to abandon plans for two more volumes covering the years after 1656.⁴²

Belknap and Hazard on Historical Research

While compiling his remarkable collection of historical records, Ebenezer Hazard met Jeremy Belknap, probably in 1778.⁴³ It was in some respects an odd combination, the successful businessman from New York by way of Philadelphia, and the threadbare parson from rural New Hampshire by way of Boston. But the two young men were the same age, and they shared a love of historical research and a passion for documents. They became close friends. Hazard advanced the money for Belknap’s first volume, *History of New Hampshire*, and arranged a printer’s apprenticeship for the parson’s son. Their correspondence, spanning the years from January 1779 until Belknap’s death

41 Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies*, p. 4.

42 Cappon, “American Historical Editors Before Jared Sparks,” pp. 380–83.

43 Shelley, “Ebenezer Hazard,” p. 56.

in June 1798, provides unparalleled insights into the world of historical documents during the nation's early years.

The friendship between the New York publisher and the New Hampshire clergyman began with an offer to exchange copies of documents. In January 1779, Ebenezer Hazard thanked Jeremy Belknap for offering to send him transcripts of documents for his historical collections. He then asked Belknap, "Please to mention on each paper the *authority* or book from which it was taken, and please favour me with a line informing me whether they were transcribed *literatim*."⁴⁴ Unwilling to accept documents at face value, Hazard thus insisted on knowing whether they were both reliable and accurate. Critical analysis would depend on the trustworthiness of the sources. These sources themselves would have to be documented and verified.

Four days later Belknap responded, stating that the papers he had offered to copy for Hazard "are some records and files which I have made use of in compiling my History, and from which I have made some transcripts to be annexed to it either as authorities or as curiosities."⁴⁵ He offered to make copies of those papers that he was not publishing in his own *History of New Hampshire*, for Hazard to use. Belknap thus recognized the duality of historical documents. Some of the documents he planned to include in his volume would establish the authority or validity of his conclusions, since it was based on primary sources. However, documents could also be used to enliven the work, either to amuse and entertain or to place the reader in the atmosphere of the era and to enhance the vicarious experience of reading. Lack of time and resources made it difficult for him to pursue all of his interests, Belknap complained. "Confined (as Pope says) 'to lead the life of a Cabbage', unable to stir from the spot where I am planted; burdened with the care of an increasing Family & obliged to pursue the proper business of my Station, I have neither Time nor advantages to make any Improvements in Science," he lamented. However, he hoped to assist those who could assume the burden of travel and research: "If I can furnish hints to those who have Leisure & Capacity to pursue them it is as much as I can pretend to."⁴⁶ If he could not complete his own extensive literary plans, Belknap could at least offer to assist those who could. This willingness to provide service to other scholars would become an important principle of the historical society and archives movement that Belknap later helped to establish. Belknap's commitment to verify each fact, using the most authentic sources available, always started with original documents, letters, manuscripts, and contemporary published accounts of historical incidents and personalities.

44 Hazard to Belknap; Portsmouth, 19 January 1779, "Correspondence Between Jeremy Belknap and Ebenezer Hazard, Part I." Volume 42, MHS Collections, p. 1.

45 Belknap to Hazard, 2 February 1779, MHS Collections, Volume 42, p. 2.

46 Belknap to Hazard, 12 May 1779, Belknap Papers, MHS.

Hazard Pioneers Documentary Editing

Even in this age of hand-written communications and limited printing capacity, the documentary record seemed extensive. Belknap recognized the difficulty of keeping up with the proliferation of public records. “Do you not find that your work grows on your hands?” he asked Hazard in March 1782. “State papers are multiplied as fast as insects in a summer day.” He suggested that if Hazard waited until completing his collection of records before beginning publication, “you will never begin at all.”⁴⁷ This echoed Hazard’s earlier comment about the magnitude of his research project. But he doggedly persevered. The challenge of gathering historical collections included both locating materials in private hands and public offices, and also selecting appropriate materials from the large quantities of documents available.

If Hazard faced challenges in collecting public records, Belknap likewise encountered difficulties in writing history based on diligent research. Shortly after completing the first of his three volumes on the history of New Hampshire, which had taken “off and on nine or ten years” to complete, Belknap estimated that it would take him at least two more years to finish the second volume. “I know that it might be run through in a much shorter time by a Grub Street Gazetteer, who would take every thing on trust, and had materials ready prepared,” Belknap wrote to Hazard, who had urged him to publish the second volume quickly. This was the type of historical writer that “the great Doctor Johnson had in view” when he stated, “No writer has a more *easy* task than the historian ... [who] has *no other* labour than of *gathering* what tradition *pours down* before him, or records treasure for his use,” Belknap declared. He doubted that Samuel Johnson had ever undertaken to write a true history:

But if he had to write the History of a country, and to search for his materials wheresoever they were likely or *not likely* to be found; if he was to find that the “treasures” contained in “records” are to be explained by private papers, and that these are to be sought in the garrets and rat-holes of old houses, when not one in a hundred that he was obliged to handle and decipher would repay him for the trouble; that “tradition,” whatever it might “pour down,” is always to be suspected and examined; and that the means of examination are not always to be obtained, – in short, if he had to go through the drudgery which you and I are pretty tolerably acquainted with, and to humour the passions of those we are obliged to, all the while, he would be fully sensible that to write an History as it should be is not so easy a work.⁴⁸

47 Belknap to Hazard, 20 March 1782, MHS Collections, Volume 42, p. 121.

48 Belknap to Hazard, 13 January, 1784, MHS Collections, Volume 42, pp. 294–95. A recent biographer argues that Johnson had been misunderstood, and that he actually had a keen “sense of history.” John A. Vance, quoted in Tucker, *Clio’s Consort*, p. 46n.

Unburdening himself to his friend and fellow historian, Belknap demonstrated both the extent of his own research and his true passion for the documentary quest. The true calling of a historian was noble. In refuting charges such as Samuel Johnson's that demeaned historians, Belknap quoted one of his favorite authors, Laurence Echard, a 17th-century English writer of Roman history. "There are required so many Qualifications and Accomplishments in an Historian, and so much care and niceness in writing an History," Echard had declared, "that some have reckon'd it One of the Most Difficult Labours Human Nature is capable of."⁴⁹ Belknap echoed these sentiments in writing to another correspondent. "None but those who have tried it can tell what is the trouble of writing an history out of fresh materials as I have," Belknap stated. "Tis like taking a piece of wilderness to convert into a field. Many a hard knock and heavy loss be requisite in the one and many head-aching and brain-perplexing hours must be spent in the other."⁵⁰ The metaphor reflects the frontier spirit with which Belknap approached his labours in pioneering this new "field" of intellectual enterprise. By thus juxtaposing his "brain-perplexing" work against the farmer's physical labour, he sought to justify his own commitment to literary pursuits and to gain recognition for historical research as a worthy calling.

Despite the difficulties of historical research and writing, however, Belknap clearly enjoyed his labours. In reading Garcilasso's account of Peruvian government and manners, he confessed to Hazard, "tho' I suspect a great part is fabulous & I am unable to distinguish the fable from ye truth," Garcilasso's account "does so much honor to human nature that I read it with as much avidity as a Girl of sixteen does a Love-tale."⁵¹ The same sense of excitement and even giddiness pervades his discussions of searching for documents. This was clearly a labour of love.

Ebenezer Hazard shared this enthusiasm for original documents, even beyond the realm of documents acquired for his *Historical Collections*. In the course of his research he developed a side interest in autograph collecting. When Belknap's *History of New Hampshire* appeared in 1784, Hazard suggested a technique still practiced by autograph seekers. "I think it will be quite polite to present General Washington with a copy of your History, and it will produce a letter from him in *his own handwriting*, which will be worth preserving," he recommended to Belknap. "I have several, which I intend to hand down carefully to posterity as highly valuable."⁵² Documents could thus become prized possessions for their symbolic value and their connection to

49 Tucker, *Massachusetts Historical Society*, pp. 2–3.

50 Tucker, *Clio's Consort*, p. 46. For a similar comment see Belknap to Hazard, 16 May 1791, MHS Collections, Volume 43, p. 258.

51 Belknap to Hazard, 11 December 1784, Belknap Papers, MHS.

52 Hazard to Belknap, 14 June 1784, MHS Collections, Volume 42, p. 356.

famous persons, as well as for the historical information and evidence they provided.⁵³ The original manuscripts, with autographs in the hand of prominent figures, possessed a value even greater than the published transcripts. Even the nation's first prominent historical editor conceded this point.

Seeking to publish his growing collections more quickly than his proposed multi-volume work would allow, Hazard in 1788 discussed plans for a magazine to publish historical documents. He hoped that the public interest in history would support such a periodical. Belknap encouraged this venture, stating that it might provide a stimulus for his own plans along similar lines in Boston. The two colleagues hoped to spark a popular appetite for historical documents that would be insatiable. The goal should be to "let the public have all the materials which can be gathered," Belknap urged Hazard. "I am sensible that the only way to preserve manuscripts is to multiply the copies," he explained.⁵⁴ This phrase anticipated Jefferson's later appeal for "a multiplication of Copies" as the means of preserving valuable manuscripts. The dangers of losing such materials to fire, theft, or neglect made publication the logical means of protection, before the advent of modern repositories, microfilm, or digital imaging.

Like all American historians and document collectors in early America, both Belknap and Hazard made a living in another field of endeavour and could devote only spare moments to pursuing their passion. However, they both hoped to sell enough copies of their books to recover expenses. They often discussed the business aspects of writing and publishing. After losing his post as postmaster general of the United States when the new government took office in 1789, Hazard unsuccessfully attempted to enter politics by gaining a seat in the New York State Assembly. Despite this failure, he consulted Belknap in August 1790 about the prospects of running for Congress and about potential sales of a proposed book. "Do you think I could make anything by publishing the Records of the United Colonies of New England?" he inquired. "Could I get subscribers enough in New England to make it worth my while? Here, I suppose, there will be but few."⁵⁵ One limitation of local or regional history was that it would appeal almost exclusively to residents of the immediate geographical area. It would be difficult to make a profit on such a publication.

Belknap responded cautiously. He was not sure whether such a history of the New England colonies would sell well enough to meet expenses. He sug-

53 James M. O'Toole, "The Symbolic Significance of Archives," *American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993), pp. 234–55.

54 Belknap to Hazard, 16 November 1788, MHS Collections, Volume 43, p. 75. It is not clear who had first used this phrase; it seems most likely that Jefferson had taken it from Belknap via Hazard.

55 Hazard to Belknap, 7 August 1790, MHS Collections, Volume 43, p. 226.

gested waiting to see how the forthcoming printing of Governor Winthrop's Journal, edited by Noah Webster, would be received. "We shall see how it takes with the public, and whether it excites an enquiry for other portions of American antiquity," Belknap recommended. "If it should, I think the work in your hands would be an excellent sequel to it."⁵⁶ Two weeks later, after seeing Winthrop's Journal, Belknap pronounced the volume "the worst executed, except one, that ever I saw." He urged Hazard to contact a young Massachusetts printer, Isaiah Thomas, about publishing "the Records."⁵⁷ Thomas, who would later found the American Antiquarian Society, had established a reputation for quality printing and sound business practices. Belknap later told Hazard that he had selected Thomas & Andrews as publishers for his politico-historical spoof, *The Foresters: An American Tale*, partly because "they have extensive connections, and can push a sale."⁵⁸ Despite this recommendation of a good printer, Belknap had been able to offer only lukewarm encouragement for his friend's proposal. Yet his observations about connections and pushing a sale show a clear understanding and a strong concern for the business aspects of historical publishing.

Hazard abandoned his idea of a documentary history of New England, but continued to pursue his main project, the *Historical Collections*. In the autumn of 1790, he returned to his native Philadelphia and entered into business with Jonas Addoms. Freed from the constraints of public service, he devoted additional time to historical editing. "My collection is likely to go to press at last," he rejoiced in March 1791. "Proposals are published, and I feel a little flattered by their reception." He then asked his old friend for assistance in promoting his book in the Boston press. He gently suggested, "perhaps a little puff in the newspaper or Magazine, or both, about the utility and importance of the collection, &c., &c., may help it along."⁵⁹

Belknap congratulated his friend on his publication. "I am very glad to find that you have at last ventured on the printing of your collection," he wrote. However, he cautioned, "It will be voluminous; and the price, though reasonable enough considering the quantity of matter, will be rather above the reach of such persons as commonly subscribe for new books." Despite these financial concerns, he assured Hazard, "The *puff* shall be attended to."⁶⁰ Belknap had lost money on his first volume of *History of New Hampshire*, so he knew

56 Belknap to Hazard, 27 August 1790, MHS Collections, Volume 43, p. 231.

57 Belknap to Hazard, 14 September 1790, MHS Collections, Volume 43, p. 233. Webster had been careless about accuracy in this 1790 edition of the Winthrop journal. He admitted later that he had never even read the original. See Cappon, "American Historical Editors Before Jared Sparks," pp. 396–97.

58 Belknap to Hazard, 19 December 1791; John Kirtland Wright, "Introduction," in Belknap, *History of New Hampshire*, Volume I, xiv.

59 Hazard to Belknap, 1 March 1791, MHS Collections, Volume 43, p. 246.

60 Belknap to Hazard, 18 March 1791, MHS Collections, Volume 43, p. 248.

the difficulties Hazard faced. "As to your publication, it is a risqué; and there is a necessity for a risqué in all such cases," he wrote in May 1791. "People say here, 'Why does not Mr. H. publish *an history* rather than *the materials for history*?'," he continued. "This is a very natural question with a certain class, who think it as easy a thing to write a history as to read it after it is written. I suppose a regular history of the United States would be a more popular and profitable work than such a collection, but it would cost you *years* of labour," Belknap added.⁶¹ In this seemingly casual remark, Belknap displayed the scholar's lack of understanding of the difficulties of historical collecting and editing, suggesting that a narrative history would require much more work than an edited collection of documents. If Hazard felt the slight he did not indicate it.

"As to publishing *an history*," Hazard replied to Belknap, "that is absolutely out of the question, for, had I abilities, I have not leisure to write one." Furthermore, he argued, "I think materials such as mine will, of themselves, form the best history that can be published, as they will furnish facts free from the glosses of commentators."⁶² This testimony to the importance of original documents provides an excellent summation of the value of historical documentary editing. Hazard believed that his publication would serve future generations by providing reliable texts of original sources that might otherwise be lost or destroyed. T. Dodson of Philadelphia printed the first volume of Hazard's *Historical Collections* in 1792, and the second volume appeared two years later. Despite his high hopes, sales of the two volumes lagged and his plans to publish two additional volumes never bore fruit. One problem was the continuing economic difficulty of book publishing when few Americans could afford such purchases. As one subscriber wrote from Newport, Rhode Island, "the people of this town who have a taste for books are few, and they are so poor that they cannot afford to purchase so costly a work."⁶³ Jeremy Belknap's warning about the risks of publishing had been accurate.

Although Hazard's *Historical Collections* did not sell enough copies to meet publication costs, the two volumes served future generations as essential sources of evidence and documentation. Not until the mid-nineteenth century did fuller editions of colonial records supercede Hazard's pioneering work. In applying to Congress for support for his *American Archives*, in 1831, Peter Force alluded to Hazard's volumes. Washington Irving used Hazard's volumes in preparing his *Knickerbocker's History of New York*, and genealogists found a wealth of information in the documents Hazard reproduced. "At the head of the general documents which it would be advantageous to examine, I place the work entitled: *Historical Collection of State Papers and Other Authentic Doc-*

61 Belknap to Hazard, 16 May 1791, MHS Collections, Volume 43, p. 258.

62 Hazard to Belknap, 6 June 1791, MHS Collections, Volume 43, p. 262.

63 Shelley, "Ebenezer Hazard: America's First Historical Editor," p. 64.

uments, intended as materials for an history of the United States of America, by Ebenezer Hazard,” Alexis de Tocqueville recommended. “One can find here, among other things, a great number of authentic documents on the affairs of New England and Virginia during this period.”⁶⁴ Hazard’s volumes thus had a long lasting impact on the study of early American history. His son, Samuel Hazard, continued this family tradition of documentary publication, becoming editor of the *Pennsylvania Archives* and establishing his own reputation as an historical editor.⁶⁵

Belknap Establishes a Repository for Documents

Historical researchers recognized, even at the outset of the American Revolution, the necessity for a central repository to collect and preserve the documents for future historical investigations. At the same time that political leaders in the Continental Congress were making provisions for accurate record-keeping of their deliberations and decisions, Jeremy Belknap and other historians were seeking a safe repository for historical records. In doing so they did not distinguish between public records of the government and private papers of citizens and organizations. Anything that might elucidate the facts of historical development of the American settlements would be important to protect. The result of this concern led to the establishment of institutions dedicated, at least in part, to providing a safe repository for manuscripts and documents of the new nation and its antecedents. The government would not establish a permanent repository for its own records until a century and a half had passed. It was left to private enterprise and individual initiative to fill this gap and to create an institutional home for the nation’s essential documents.

In 1790, as the recently established Constitutional government had begun to settle much of the turmoil of the revolutionary and confederation eras, the United States began to establish social and cultural institutions that would define the new nation and its people. Private libraries had been established in many cities, collecting books and printed materials to feed a growing intellectual curiosity and a democratic need for information. Two learned societies had been established: the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Boston. These two institutions engaged in intellectual discussion and publication, but did not collect books and manuscripts or establish research facilities. There was no institution in the United States where one could find a significant body of research materials. Manuscripts remained in the hands of individuals and families. Governmental records were kept, often haphazardly, by the offices that created them for public business purposes. No repository existed for public records, either at the

64 Ibid., p. 72.

65 Ibid., p. 73.

state or federal level. Even the journals of Congress could not be consulted by historians, since they were regarded as secret information. Political leaders treated their official correspondence and documents as personal property, which could be destroyed or taken home at will when they left office.⁶⁶ This lack of an institutional base for the nation's growing documentary heritage not only endangered the preservation of such irreplaceable records, it also made historical research difficult and time consuming.

Belknap first advocated establishment of such a repository in June 1774, as the Anglo-American conflict began to erupt. In the draft of an apparently unsent letter to Andrew Eliot of Boston, Belknap wrote that an effort should be made to collect sources relevant to the growing Anglo-American controversy and that these be deposited in the Harvard College library for use by a "future historian." Belknap asserted "that the present Times exhibit so critical and important a Scene as must make a distinguished figure in the Eyes of posterity and thence arises a necessity that a properly authenticated Series of information impartially collected should descend to them." The repository that Belknap envisioned would acquire "such authentic Documents as may enable some future historian to delineate the present times in as full and perfect a manner as possible." There were in the "Libraries and Custody of Gentlemen of the present age many materials which are now neglected and which may soon be scattered the loss of which posterity may regret as much as we do now the carelessness of former Times." He listed what a future researcher would value: "Political pamphlets, Newspapers, Letters, funeral and Election Sermons and many other papers which are now regarded only as beings of a day may if preserved give posterity a better idea of the Genius and Temper of the present age (and of our most material Transactions) than can be derived from any other source." As Belknap's biographer stated, "Thus, while his fellow revolutionaries were intent upon making history, Belknap was preoccupied with the thought of preserving it."⁶⁷ History was not merely the accounts of ancient events and heroes, but the fabric of current events. Without adequate care for contemporary documents, future historians would have few authentic records on which to base their conclusions.

Jeremy Belknap's hope that Harvard would establish a repository for collecting historical documents proved fruitless. If a private educational institution would not devote attention to such a worthy project, from an intellectual perspective, he had hoped that the public benefits of such an enterprise would appeal to the democratic instincts of governmental officials. "The very great utility of a public repository for such papers under proper regulations, has appeared to [me] in the strongest light," he wrote in the preface to his *History of New Hampshire* in 1784, adding that he was "persuaded that it is an object

66 Tucker, *Clio's Consort*, pp. 60–61.

67 *Ibid.*, pp. 62–63; see also Tucker, *Massachusetts Historical Society*, pp. 6–7.

worthy the attention on an enlightened legislature.”⁶⁸ This goal became a passion. “The want of public repositories for historical materials, as well as the destruction of many valuable ones by fires, by war and by the lapse of time has long been a subject of regret in my mind,” he wrote to Vice President John Adams in July 1789. “Many papers which are daily thrown away may in future be much wanted, but except here and there a person who has a curiosity of his own to gratify no one cares to undertake the collection and of this class of Collectors there are scarcely any who take care for securing what they have got together after they have quitted the stage.”⁶⁹ Even this appeal to the Vice President of the United States did not elicit a pledge of support in establishing a permanent repository for threatened documents.

At this time Belknap turned to his friend Ebenezer Hazard, whose collecting efforts certainly must have seemed more substantial than those of other collectors about whom he had complained to Adams. John Pintard, an acquaintance of Hazard’s, had visited Belknap to discuss his own interest in forming a “Society of Antiquaries.” The necessity of such independent action had become clear to all three men. The only question was who would take the leadership in making their common dream a reality. Belknap embraced Pintard’s suggestion of forming a private society, but sought reassurance from Hazard about Pintard’s ability to carry forward such a scheme. “He seems to have a literary taste, is very loquacious and unreserved,” Belknap wrote. “Do give me his character.”⁷⁰ Hazard responded by stating that the plans for an antiquarian society were progressing, and that Pintard’s personal collections would be valuable as the foundation for such a repository. “Mr. Pintard mentioned to me his thoughts about an American Antiquarian Society,” Hazard reassured Belknap. “The idea pleases me much. We shall have the plan on paper one of these days, and you will doubtless be made acquainted with it.” He added: “Mr. P. has lately purchased a very large collection of pamphlets (in vols.) relating to the American Revolution. ... It is valuable, as is Mr. P.’s library.”⁷¹ Despite these hopeful beginnings, Hazard and Pintard remained unable to secure wider support for establishing an organization of antiquarians in New York.

Belknap pursued similar efforts in Boston, however, and in January 1791 he and nine like-minded antiquarians formed the Massachusetts Historical Society. Shortly after the initial meeting to adopt a constitution for the new organization, Belknap wrote to Hazard with the exciting news that their common dream had become reality. “We have now formed our Society; and it is dubbed, not the Antiquarian, but the ‘Historical Society,’” Belknap wrote. Membership in the society would be limited to twenty-five, in order to ensure that only those willing to work energetically for a common purpose would be admitted. “We

68 Belknap, *History of New Hampshire*, Volume I, xx.

69 Tucker, *Clio’s Consort*, pp. 63–64.

70 Belknap to Hazard, 10 August 1789, MHS Collections, Volume 43, p. 157.

71 Hazard to Belknap, 5 September 1789, MHS Collections, Volume 43, p. 165.

intend to be an *active*, not a *passive*, literary body; not to lie waiting, like a bed of oysters, for the tide (of communication) to flow in upon us, but to *seek* and *find*, to *preserve* and *communicate* literary intelligence, especially in the historical way.⁷² Although not fully ready to place the entire plan in motion, the new society espoused lofty principles and ambitious goals. Belknap's letter announcing the formation of the Massachusetts Historical Society arrived just as Hazard's own pet project, publication of the *Historical Collections*, was finally coming to fruition. Conceived in the same year, these two enterprises, which established the beginnings of two important traditions of historical documentation, both came to life nearly two decades later, in 1791 and 1792.

Conclusion: Two Methods for Preserving Documents

Jeremy Belknap and Ebenezer Hazard devoted their intellectual energies to preserving primary sources of American history. Whereas Hazard focused on collecting and publishing documents, Belknap ventured into historical interpretation and narrative writing. Both were amateur historians conducting this work in the odd hours stolen from their busy professional and family lives. Yet they helped to transform historical research and writing in the United States from a casual literary exercise into an intellectual discipline requiring extensive research in primary sources in order to authenticate any accounts of the past.

Belknap and Hazard recognized the power of documents to confirm the results of the American Revolution and to solidify the power of the social elite in the new nation. In doing so they moved among the political and intellectual leaders of their age, corresponding with presidents, members of Congress, scientists such as Benjamin Rush, and other literary figures. These social connections did not guarantee acceptance of their historical interpretations, but they did have direct access to the nation's founders. Although disagreeing with Belknap's views, that he thought would "encourage the present Spirit of Crusade against European things," Vice President John Adams acknowledged his abilities. "Dr. Belknap is so able an Historian that I wish his Philosophy to be such as will endure and be no diminution of his authority when the momentary Fanaticism of the time shall have subsided," Adams wrote in February 1793. "Dr. Belknap writes not to the popular Pulse of the Moment but for Posterity: and before them, the Doctrine he now favours will be demonstrated to be unfounded."⁷³ President George Washington also read Belknap's histories. In May 1794 he thanked Belknap for a copy of the first volume of *American Biography*, which traced the lives of early explorers of the continent, and asked to be listed as a subscriber. "I wish it was in my power to afford you any aid in the prosecution of so desirable a work," the President wrote to the Boston clergyman. "But I do not see wherein I can; and if I did, my avocations are

72 Belknap to Hazard, 19 February 1791, MHS Collections, Volume 43, p. 245.

73 John Adams letter, 18 February 1793, Belknap Papers, MHS.

of such a nature as to allow me no time to profit by the means. My good wishes therefore seems to be all that is left me on this occasion.”⁷⁴ Thomas Jefferson continued to take an active interest in Ebenezer Hazard’s documentary publications. In November 1791, as the first volume of *Historical Collections* was going to press, Jefferson sent a brief note, stating: “Th. Jefferson sends to Mr. Hazard the papers he spoke of. Mr. Hazard has a copy of the grant to L. Fairfax, an important paper to Virginia. If he has not Th. Jefferson has the substance of it faithfully extracted. He will thank Mr. Hazard to return such of these papers as he shall not print.”⁷⁵ These tokens of respect from the political leaders of the era and heroes of the American Revolution, demonstrated the impact that these two amateur historians and their colleagues had begun to make on the American cultural scene. Preserving original documents, including both public records and private papers, served the public interest. Such documents became essential for evidence, authority, accountability, and historical memory of the origins of the new nation.

The great task of preserving documents, however, could not be conducted successfully by individuals acting on their own, nor by publishing the most important such records. In the early nineteenth century, numerous documentary editors followed Ebenezer Hazard’s example, including his own son Samuel Hazard, Jared Sparks, and Peter Force. However, it soon became apparent that, despite Jefferson’s admonition not to rely on locks and vaults, archival materials could be permanently protected only by creating secure repositories. This resulted in the institutionalization of the documentary preservation movement. The first historical societies started the American archival tradition. Massachusetts founded the first such repository in 1791, followed by New York in 1804, and the American Antiquarian Society in 1812. By the eve of the sectional conflict historical societies had been established in all regions of the country: twenty-two in New England, thirty-eight in the Mid-Atlantic states, twenty in the South, and twenty-one in the West. Several territories organized historical societies even before admission to statehood.⁷⁶ However, these were private organizations. Not until the early twentieth century did any state assume responsibility for establishing a formal archives to preserve its own records. A National Archives did not appear until 1934. The tradition begun by Jeremy Belknap, however, had sown the seeds for these developments. The necessity of preserving historical documents, both by publication and by creating archival repositories, increasingly gained recognition in early America.

74 George Washington to Jeremy Belknap, 9 May 1794, Belknap Papers, MHS. See also Washington to Belknap, 15 June 1798, Belknap Papers, MHS.

75 Shelley, “Ebenezer Hazard: America’s First Historical Editor,” p. 65.

76 Van Tassel, *Recording America’s Past*, pp. 181–90; Callcott, *History in the United States, 1800–1860*, pp. 35–36.