



# Collecting Manuscripts: By Private Collectors

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THE COLLECTING OF AUTOGRAPHS or manuscripts (in their purest sense the words are truly interchangeable) in the United States began early in the nineteenth century and the individual collector of today perpetuates the determination, singlemindedness, integrity, and scholarship of the earlier greats: T. A. Emmet, W. B. Sprague, J. B. Thacher, Simon Gratz, and Israel Tefft. Were it not for these earlier collectors, who saved from loss and destruction many important documents of the heritage of this land, some of the better institutions of learning would be poor indeed, in manuscript material; for the bases of their great collections of today are the gifts bestowed upon them by men such as those named. It is discouraging, though amusing at times, to hear the unfavorable criticism which is heaped upon the private collector by uninformed professionals whose jobs may be to acquire, preserve, catalog, or publish manuscripts. The collector of today is neither a hoarder nor a mysterious unknown who keeps his treasures from outside eyes. More often than not, he is willing to cooperate with legitimate scholars and writers by making his collection available. Frequently he will publish monographs, write articles, display publicly or illustrate lectures with his manuscripts as a base. To the extent that this is so, might it not be said that private collections are more easily accessible than many of the larger institutional holdings?

The private collector and institution have available to them the same sources of supply of manuscript material. Generally, however, the individual collector's wants are not as well-known to the trade as are the institution's, so he is less apt to receive special offerings. A cursory examination of the sources of manuscripts with some observations, suggestions, and caveats culled from collecting experience, follows:

The first source is the dealer. Although there are no more than a dozen autograph dealers in the United States, and perhaps as many

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### *Collecting Manuscripts: By Private Collectors*

throughout the rest of the world, there are several hundred antiquarian booksellers who handle autographs as an integral part of their business. In fact it would be surprising if there is a single rare book dealer who has not at one time sold autographs. The dealers who limit themselves to autographs, publish periodic catalogs, or offering lists, and collectors look forward to their receipt with enthusiasm. Some dealers specialize in American historical material, other in literary and musical items, but the collector cannot afford to overlook any catalog on the assumption that there would be nothing of interest to him in it. A catalog of books mailed by a German dealer recently, listed a fine Longfellow letter, buried among nineteenth century German and French biographies. Items of American historical interest appear in offerings from Denmark, Austria, Sweden, and Holland. Close study of all catalogs will reward the private collector with "finds" related to his field of interest.

Most dealers have nationwide mailing lists and it is virtually impossible for all customers to receive their catalogs on the same day. Staggered mailings, based on geographical sections, are used by some dealers in an attempt to give each prospective buyer the same opportunity to purchase, but even this plan is not always successful. Consequently, if a particularly desirable item is found in a catalog, the collector would be wise to telephone or telegraph the dealer. The "first come, first served" policy is universally applied. The fear sometimes expressed by collectors that by calling or wiring they are placing such importance to the item that the dealer may withdraw it in order to hold it at a higher price, is not valid. Autograph dealers obtain new customers and hold old ones by making sales at the right price and it would be foolhardy for them to cause a withdrawal of offered material. No such experience has been brought to the writer's attention.

The general dealer policy on orders from new customers is to require cash with the order. Where credit has been established this is not necessary. With manuscripts, unlike other collectibles, no two pieces are alike. Condition is important to many collectors and cannot always be adequately described. Full contents of a letter or document are rarely given in the catalog. For these reasons, most sales are on an approval basis. Where such is the case, the collector has an obligation to the dealer to make a prompt decision: either to inform the dealer that he is keeping the material or to return it so that it can be sold elsewhere. When items are returned as unsatisfactory, they should be as securely wrapped as they were on receipt, insured for as much

as the dealer had placed upon them, and shipping charges paid by the collector—not returned with postage due. Careful reading of catalog descriptions and knowledge of standard abbreviations will cut down the quantity of returns. Similarly, more complete and accurate listings by dealers will accomplish the same result.

Most dealers list only a fraction of their inventory in catalogs, so collectors desiring submission to them of specific types of autographs should make their wants known to dealers. This will result in the obtaining of more and better items. An old canard, frequently repeated, is that the dealers will raise their prices to a collector of specialized material. Perhaps a few may do so, but the collector does not have to buy if he believes the price is too high. If other collectors justify his opinion of value by not buying also, then the price may be lowered. On the subject of price, generally, it may be said that dealer offerings, either by catalog listing or private quotation, are not subject to counter-offers. Dealers will price their autographs at figures which they believe to be correct from the standpoint of market values or what they "have to get" for them. Dealers make mistakes, of course; sometimes in the collector's favor through underpricing, sometimes the reverse. But offering the dealer less than listed price is not considered good taste and will in all probability cut down the number of offerings which the collector guilty of such practice would otherwise receive. Dealers have said that large institutions such as college libraries are the more frequent counterbidders among their clientele.

A second source of autographs for the private collector is the public auction. There are only a few auction houses in this country which handle autographs regularly and then it is usually incidental to the major lots put up for sale; namely, old and rare books. In recent years, there has been but one auction house with sufficient autograph material at hand to warrant the holding of sales devoted exclusively to autographs. Despite the current paucity of autograph auctions, the public sale will continue to be a major source for collectors as it has been for over fifty years.

In all public auctions, sales are final and purchases may not be returned. For this reason, it is highly important that the buyer have full knowledge about the lots on which he is bidding—knowledge which is not always to be obtained from the catalog listing. If the collector is interested in a number of lots in a given sale, he may wish to inspect the material prior to the sale. Certainly inspection by the buyer or his agent is strongly recommended. Bidding by mail, that is completing the form sent out by the auction house and allowing it to

*Collecting Manuscripts: By Private Collectors*

place your bid, is acceptable procedure for minor items but where high prices are expected there can be no substitute for personal inspection, verification, and bidding. The writer's personal preference, despite a more than superficial knowledge of autographs in his field and of auction methods, is to place his bids with an experienced dealer. The dealer's charge for bidding for a client is usually ten per cent of the price brought by the lot. This ten per cent is well worth paying, for the dealer will guarantee authenticity as well as handle the purchase. (Most, but not all, auction houses will not guarantee its autographs.) In addition, the dealer will advise his client as to condition, will estimate the sales price and give other pertinent data. At auction, the private collector is competing with other collectors, dealers buying on order for clients and dealers buying for stock. The collector has an advantage over the last group because he is willing to pay a retail price, whereas the inventory buyer must mark up the price of what he buys. Buying at auction in person is exciting but it does not per se give clues to real or supposed value. A dealer purchase, as indicated above, might be on order from a client; prices may be abnormally high because of the glamour of the particular collection put up (the O. P. Barrett sale of *Lincolniana* was an example); timing of the sale might be bad and weather, too, might influence prices. Auction buying is good fun as well as a source of supply. It is recommended!

Occasional opportunities will arise for the private collector to purchase autographs away from normal channels. Family papers, land grants, commissions, and sometimes important individual pieces turn up in attic trunks, bank vaults, and less likely locations, and if the collector's interests are well-known, these may be offered to him. In the typical case, an owner will have no fixed price but will ask for an offer. Then he will shop that offer with another collector or dealer. For this reason, most collectors ask the owner to set his price for the papers rather than making an offer which becomes a base price which the owner will use as a lever with others. The literary collector may find authors' letters inserted in books. Browsers in antiquarian bookstores run across autographs in bins or on shelves. Collectors of contemporary statesmen, leaders, and just plain politicians often obtain their material through direct correspondence. Provocative questions posed in these letters may bring worthwhile responses, but the practice is not without its critics even when done with good motivation. In short, there are autograph sources wherever there are people who can read and write. It remains for the collector to seek them out.

Although there are some collectors whose interests are so catholic that their holdings fall into no particular category, the bulk of today's private collections are in specialized fields. By far the largest single interest among collectors is the Civil War period. There are hundreds of collectors of Union and Confederate military officers, Lincoln and his cabinet, Jefferson Davis and his cabinet, and letters to and from soldiers in the field. Similarly, there are many collectors of presidential autographs, signers of the Declaration of Independence, U. S. military and naval heroes, cabinet officers, and colonial and revolutionary period items. The list of historical fields of interest is endless. Specialization may limit some collections to writings of one man or about one incident. There are many fine musical and literary collections, some general in nature, some restricted. Actually, it would be difficult to think of any field or any reasonably well-known person of the past whose writings are not being collected by someone, someplace.

To a prospective or new collector, no rules can be laid down which would be proper guides for him to follow. Suggestions may be given with the assurance that no two collectors will agree entirely with them. The following, therefore, are merely personal recommendations based on some years of contact with old and new collectors.

1. Select a field of interest which by its nature will provide ample sources of autographs.

2. Stay away from occupation categories such as cabinet officers, presidents, etc. These are S.O.P. (standard operating procedure) for too many collectors and the wallet is the only limiting factor.

3. Conversely, select a period, person or category which has been neglected for unknown cause. For example, the letters of J. C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster have been a drug on the market for years. Yet they are frequently interesting and important historically. There are few collectors of eighteenth to twentieth century medical men of note. Letters of western pioneers, Texas heroes, electrical and mechanical inventors of the last one hundred years, all go begging for buyers. Certainly they offer a challenge for the collector and the contribution to scholarship which may result from careful study of his subject may be very rewarding to the collector.

A widely-held belief about autograph collecting is that it requires large cash resources. Undoubtedly this has arisen because of the propensity of newspapermen to affix dollar values on all manuscript material which they deem noteworthy. Varying with the categories selected, individuals can gather compact and important collections to suit limited or liberal means. For example, a collection of Con-

### *Collecting Manuscripts: By Private Collectors*

federate letters—to and from soldiers in blue—was put together over a period of years by a collector who was restricted to small cash purchases, generally no more than \$5 being paid for any item. Yet this collection is considered an important source of authentic information about contemporary times by writers and scholars of that period in history.

No discussion of price would be complete without a few words about the factors which combine to establish price. Here, as in other phases of autograph collecting, there is no unanimity but at the risk of contradiction there follows a list of those factors in order of importance:

1. Context or contents.
2. Popularity of the person being collected.
3. Rarity.
4. Condition.

In explanation of the above, it is apparent that a letter or document of Washington detailing hardships at Valley Forge would bear a higher price tag than his receipt of a bill. Similarly, a letter of Beethoven in which he discusses the merits of his Ninth Symphony would be more sought after than a routine "thank you" note. Thus, contents are most important. As to popularity, the vagaries of time or collectors' fancies may play a role. Hundreds of Lincoln, Washington, Jefferson, and John Adams manuscripts have changed hands in the last ten years. Yet they always bring relatively high prices when compared with other presidents. They are, of course, highly collectible and the number available on the market, barring a flood of new material, does not appreciably affect the price. It is interesting to note that unpopular figures such as Benedict Arnold, Adolf Hitler, and Mussolini do not bring really high prices even though they may be rare in holographic form. Rarity is of itself no indication of value to a collector. A prominent dealer, recently deceased, gathered together at great pains a collection of the writings of all of the signers of Texas' republican constitution and offered them for sale as a group. Many of the signers were semi-literate and obscure and anything in their hand therefore extremely rare. Despite this, there were no takers for the lot, and the offering price was within the means of many average collectors. Not even in the land of black gold, where apparently talk is big but interest in origins or history is small, could a sale be made.

Offered two documents of equal importance but in different states

of condition, a collector or institution will naturally select the one in better shape. Since, however, there are very few, if any, "duplicates" in the autograph field, condition becomes a relative matter and unless an item is to be bought specifically for purposes of display, its physical appearance does not materially affect its value. Modern methods of repair and preservation have redeemed many badly damaged autographs for collectors and institutions alike.

On September 24, 1956, a television presentation on the Westinghouse "Studio One" series, told the story of a collector of Lincolniana who bought at auction what was represented as a facsimile or forgery of a draft of the Gettysburg Address but which was in actuality an original. The collector, to the consternation of all, decided to burn the Address as a means of bringing to life the full import of its words. This was to be his way of dramatizing Lincoln's political morality to a generation which he believed had strayed away from those principles. Against the backdrop of incendiarism an opportunity was given to those who opposed the collector's action to present their arguments. In the end, of course, "right prevailed over wrong" and the Address was saved by a little boy who first discovered the monstrous error. The show undoubtedly made both collectors and archivists squirm a little, but it was all in good fun. The point of mentioning it here is simple. Collectors love manuscripts for a variety of reasons: for the place in history which they represent; for the views which they express; for the personal contact with the writer which the manuscripts give to the collector; for the knowledge which can be acquired through collecting and owning. These are all valid reasons for collecting—and owning—just as are valid the reasons for the existence of great institutional libraries. But the true collector does not have to burn his holdings in order to call attention to their messages. He displays them, publishes them or writes about them. Above all, he appreciates their value not only to himself but to the public and succeeding generations. He therefore preserves his manuscripts in a manner which ensures their survival.