

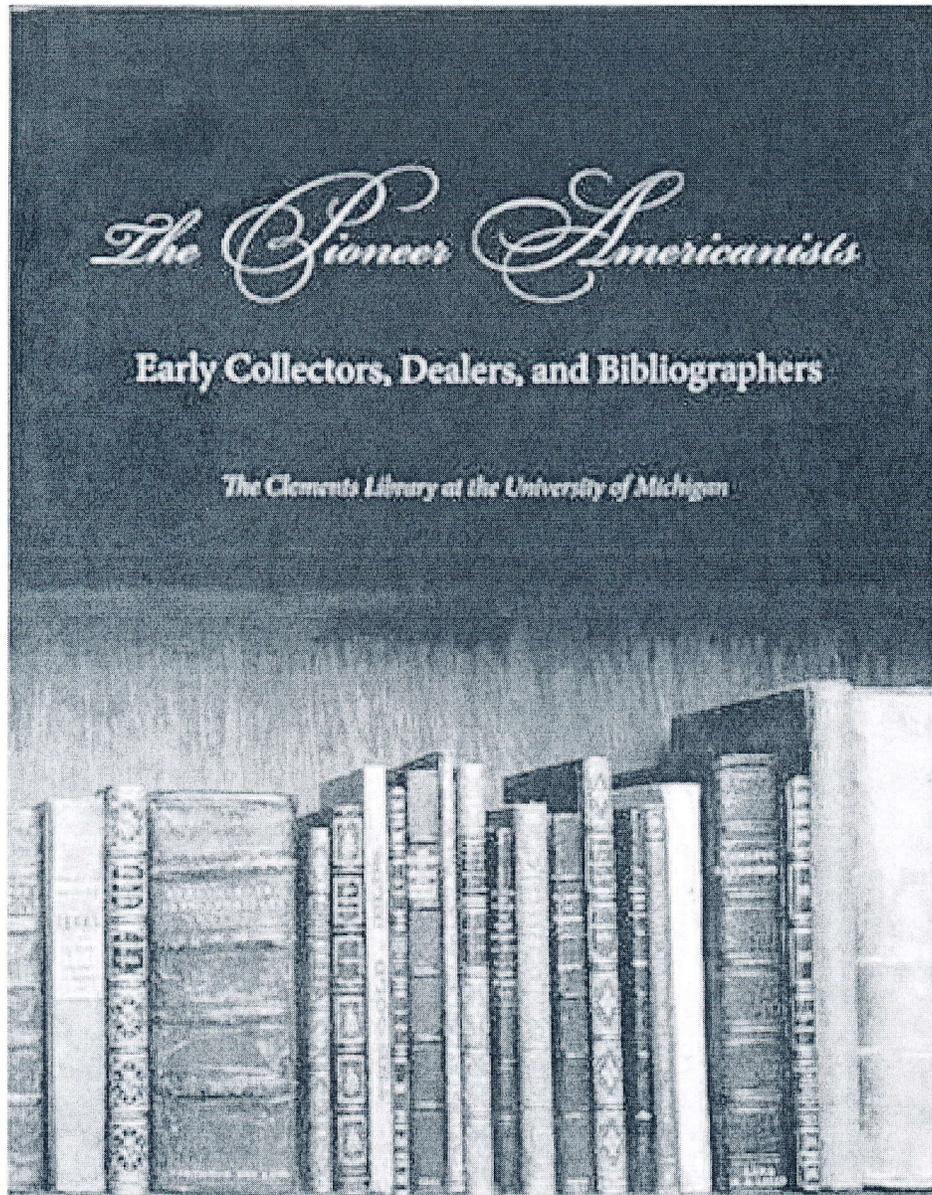
*“Americana! That’s the stuff
to collect.” – or,
The Clements Library Does It Again*

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GRAFFAGNINO, J. Kevin, Terese M. AUSTIN, Jayne PTOLEMY, and Brian Leigh DUNNIGAN (editors). *The Pioneer Americanists: Early Collectors, Dealers, and Bibliographers.* Ann Arbor: The Clements Library at the University of Michigan, 2017. Folio. Hardbound, dust jacket. ix, 230pp. Extensive color illustrations, pictorial endpapers. **\$50.00.**

In the Spring 2016 issue of *Manuscripts*, I reviewed J. Kevin Graffagnino and company’s *A Great Library Easily Begets Affection: Memories of the William L. Clements Library, 1923-2015*. I’m delighted to report once again that this world-class rare book and manuscripts library shows itself adept at putting out a handsome and well-illustrated book on a worthwhile subject at a reasonable price.

And oh what a pantheon this is! The sixteen persons profiled in *The Pioneer Americanists: Early Collectors, Dealers, and Bibliographers* represent a *Who’s Who in Americana*. The general public may not be familiar with many of their names, but to Americanists like myself or any lover of American history these are legendary figures all. Each already has a body of literature written about him, to be sure – articles, eulogies, appreciations,



dissertations, some bio-graphies. But to gather primary source material on this group in one volume truly makes this (to use that bookseller's sales pitch – guilty as charged) a “first of its kind” on the subject.

As Graffagnino notes in his foreword, “This volume looks at the leading Americanists – collectors, dealers, bibliographers, curators, auctioneers – who completed or substantially completed their careers before 1900. It consists of autobiographical or biographical

sketches that provide a sense of what these individuals and their contemporaries thought about Americana as a bibliophilic specialty.... Accounts written 150 to 200 years ago." *The Pioneer Americanists* is, he stresses, "an introduction to the field," a means to "open the door to further research and investigation.... If it also sets the table for research on the post-1900 notables in Americana... so much the better. There is a great deal of work to do in our field." Fingers crossed that Graffagnino is paving the way for a sequel volume down the road.

The Pioneer Americanists opens with "Bibliotheca Americana: The Rise of a Collecting Specialty, 1700-1900," Graffagnino's first-rate survey deftly summing up two centuries of the developing, sprawling field known as Americana. Those not immersed in the field may be surprised to learn that "By the early decades of the seventeenth century, the field of printed Americana... had grown to hundreds of titles in nearly a dozen European and Native American languages" – and that the first bibliography of Americana was published in 1629 (Antonio Rodriguez de Leon Pinelo, *Epitome de la Biblioteca Oriental i Occidental*) and the first in English in 1713 (Kennett White, *Bibliothecae Americanae Primordia*).

We see the transition of Americana collecting from a largely European avocation to Americans collecting Americana, with many a famed colonial collector (not included among the profiles) mentioned – the likes of the Mather trio (Richard, Increase, Cotton), the Winthrops (2,000 volumes), John Adams (3,000 volumes), William Byrd II (3,500 volumes), Isaac Norris, James Logan, Benjamin Franklin (4,276 volumes), William Mackenzie (7,500 volumes), Thomas Prince. We see the earliest American booksellers pop up, characters such as supposed spy James Rivington in New York and Robert Bell in Philadelphia. We see the first public collections, subscription libraries and historical societies spring to life in state after state.

Booksellers dealing seriously in Americana began entering the picture in the early-nineteenth century, often in London but also

in continental Europe. American in London Obadiah Rich, who “stood tall above the Americana specialists who followed him” was a far cry from the less gentlemanly but far better known Henry Stevens, Jr., another American in London whose “propensity for crossing ethical lines frequently got him in trouble with his customers and his colleagues.... Respected by some, reviled by some, Henry Stevens, Jr., was a towering figure among nineteenth-century Americanists” – kind of an A.S.W. Rosenbach predecessor.

Let’s not forget pathfinding autograph dealers such as Thomas O.H.P. Burnham, who “took over his father’s Boston shop in the 1830s, adding American autographs to books for sale to a loyal clientele.” And lest we forget that Americana is not just *printed* books, pamphlets, broadsides and ephemera, Graffagnino reminds us that

The parameters of American collecting expanded in these decades, with autograph collecting making an especially noticeable impact on the field. Rev. William B. Sprague (1795-1876) of Albany, New York, collected historical manuscripts with such zeal.... The collection of Israel K. Tefft (1794-1848) of Savannah, Georgia, included more than 25,000 autographs. Jacob Engelbrecht (1797-1878) and Robert Gilmore, Jr., (1774-1848) of Maryland assembled noteworthy collections. Eliza H. Allen (1796-1873)...was the first woman to put together a full set of signatures of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. These and other antebellum American autograph collectors were charting new ground; not until after the Civil War would the field see specialist dealers appear to cater to the interest in handwritten historical Americana.

The Civil War came and went, creating its own massive collecting field, and other collecting vogues, such as historical prints and extra-illustrated books, came in and out of fashion. Western Americana, Native Americana and other today-standard fields established themselves and remain pillars. Women's studies ("for all its appeal Americana remained almost entirely a man's world"), African-Americana and other fields all had their pioneers toiling away unheeded, though broad attraction wouldn't come until long after the Gilded Age had passed. Graffagnino characterizes these last few decades of the nineteenth century, with titans such as Hubert Howe Bancroft, Henry Huth and other magnates entering the fray, as "a heady whirl of wonderful treasures, brisk competition in the market, rising prices, accommodating dealers, and inspiration in the assurance that building a great Americana library was a sure path to respect and reputation."

Meanwhile autographs "remained a popular collecting area for Americanists in the late nineteenth century," as Graffagnino points out.

...newcomers like Simon Gratz and Ferdinand J. Dreer of Philadelphia, Lewis J. Cist of Cincinnati, Thomas A. Emmets of New York, and Edward H. Leffingwell of New Haven rose.... Lyman Copeland Draper's *Essay on the Autographic Collections of the Signers* (1889) inspired wealthy enthusiasts to build their own Founding Fathers collections. This era saw the emergence of specialist dealers in autographs as well....

These later decades also saw book collecting clubs and their publications flourishing (and just as often fading), auction houses became the venue of choice to disperse large collections, and dozens of bibliographical projects large and small were underway – huge subject bibliographies such as Joseph Sabin's *Dictionary of Books Relating to America* and Henry Harrisse's *Bibliotheca Americana*

Vetustissima, private library catalogues such as John Carter Brown's and numerous state-specific bibliographies. Graffagnino captures well the chaotic, roller-coaster nature of Americana and its turn-of-the-century upshot: "...by 1900 the world of old books was far better known in this country than it had been half a century earlier."

Most fittingly, Graffagnino has the grace and sense to close out this memorable account of these nineteenth-century Americanists by reminding us that those who followed in the twentieth century stood on their shoulders. These pioneers "built great personal collections and saved countless rarities from destruction; they created some of the most enduring and influential historical institutions in the United States; and they painstakingly described and cataloged countless books, pamphlets, maps, and other sources on American history. By creating and nurturing the market for buying and selling printed and manuscript Americana, they raised public consciousness of collecting as a key component in preserving the heritage of North America."

That's the first 25 pages only of *The Pioneer Americanists'* 230 pages, and it's worth the cost of admission. Of the 16 chapters covering that many notable Americanists – that's a dozen or more pages per person – Isaiah Thomas by far has the greatest name recognition. If you wish to test your Americana mettle, tick off those you either know well or whose name at least rings a distant bell (not counting the eight mentioned so far in this review): White Kennett, Peter Force, John Carter Brown, Samuel G. Drake, James Lenox, John Russell Bartlett, William Menzies, Lyman Copeland Draper, George Brinley Jr., Henry Stevens Jr., Joseph Sabin, Samuel L.M. Barlow, Robert Clarke, Henry HARRISSE, and Hubert Howe Bancroft. If you're familiar with the person, *The Pioneer Americanists* feels like reawakening an old friendship; if you've never heard of the person, it's like finally meeting that friend of a friend you've heard so much about.

Printed in a pleasing two-column format, each profile offers up a page or two just-the-facts summation of that person's life followed by a brief title list "For Additional Reading." Then follows a generous selection about that person culled from one or more out-of-print biographies, unpublished sketches, scholarly monographs – all manner of rather obscure, hard-to-track-down sources. Thus the chapter on lawyer and collector Samuel Barlow (1826-89) features an essay from *The Late Samuel Latham Mitchell Barlow: Introduction to the Catalogue of His Library*, that of bibliographer John Russell Bartlett (1805-86) features William Gammell's speech *Life and Services of the Hon. John Russell Bartlett: A Paper Read Before the Rhode Island Historical Society*, that of archivist/historian Peter Force (1790-1868) features George W. Greene's "Col Peter Force – The American Annalist" from the 1878 *Magazine of American History*, that of collector William Menzies (1810-96) from James Wynne's 1860 book *Private Libraries of New York* and Daniel M. Treadwell's 1892 *Monograph on Privately Illustrated Books* and Joseph Sabin's unpublished biographical sketch owned by the Clements Library.... What a wealth of biographical and bibliographical data these sources represent.

You've got to hand it to the William L. Clements Library for undertaking this ambitious project. Graffagnino, Austin, Ptolemy and Dunnigan shed light on sixteen fascinating figures whose contribution to our understanding of American history is inestimable and often underrated. *The Pioneer Americanists: Early Collectors, Dealers, and Bibliographers* was "more than seven years in the making," notes Graffagnino, and I don't doubt it. Thoughtfully compiled, well written, superbly illustrated, a handsome production – I have a hard time finding fault with *The Pioneer Americanists* except to wish it were twice as long. Here's hoping it sparks interest that results in further studies into the lives of these individuals – some of the most intriguing bibliophiles you'll ever meet.