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No. 4

PROPOSAL FOR A VIRGINIA HISTORICAL
SOCIETY, 1824

BY JOHN HOLT RICE.

“The publication of the Statutes at Large, by W. W. Hening, has I believe been noticed more than once in your Magazine. I have not been informed whether that important work has been completed. But I must express my most earnest wish that if this has not been the case, it may be carried through without delay. [Vol. XIII of Hening certified by the Council of State, Nov. 8, 1823].

It would be only a repetition of what has been said before, to state the value of that publication to the lawyer, the historian, and the literary gentleman. But I may be permitted to observe, that while reading the earlier volumes of the statutes, I have very frequently been led to inquire, why is there no *Antiquarian* or *Historical Society* in Virginia?

* * * The men who have guided public opinion among us, do not appear ever to have considered the tendency of every thing to deterioration. Hence there have been almost no associations for intellectual improvement.

* * * I wish to know why there may not be established a Historical and Antiquarian Society in the *Old Dominion*?

The character of our forefathers, and their exploits in leading the way in the mighty work of colonizing North America, are surely worthy of inquiry. The various events in this great undertaking, the hardships endured, the exploits of valour, the deeds of heroism and of kindness, performed by those who laid open to us this goodly heritage, are worthy to be snatched from the fading traditions of the country, where they are fast sinking into oblivion, and to be recorded, where they will remain descriptive memorials of the sort of men who settled in these regions; and will afford most important information to the classic historian (when will he appear?) who shall write that which all posterity shall love to read.

I have no doubt but that there lie, mouldering in old trunks, in closets and garrets, many letters and other manuscripts of men of former times, which a society, properly organized and well conducted, might bring out of obscurity and preserve from destruction. The result of the establishment of such institutions in other states, allows no room to apprehend a want of materials. All that is wanting to make most interesting collections, is skill and industry.

But my only object in this paper, is to throw out hints, which will set others to thinking, and feeling, on a subject of great interest, and of no small importance."

Literary and Evangelical Magazine, (Richmond). Vol. VII, January 1824, pp. 40-42.

[April 1893, a quarter century ago, appeared the first number of the Virginia Historical Magazine so active today in the work of consolidating important groups of the English speaking peoples.

It would be a long story, the tracing of the origins of the Virginia Historical Society before our Civil War, and the development of the Society since the war. Dr. Rice's suggestions, seen above, must at least be interesting at this late time, when Virginia, as in 1824, confronts problems not to be settled by antiquarian research, but perhaps less difficult on the whole if the past is understood.

The first Virginia Philosophical Society seems to have taken shape at Williamsburg a few years before the Revolution. It

remains to be proved whether any sort of connection can be established between that society and the Virginia Historical and Philosophical Society founded at Richmond in late December 1831. Evidence lacking, the Society we know may be attributed rather to the forward moving spirit of the time, conspicuous enough for a few years after 1815. Slowly turn the pages of Niles's Register for those years and observe how alive public opinion was to the possibilities and means of progress. John Holt Rice, an evangelical, was one of those in Virginia at that time most desirous to see the State go about its business rationally and wholesomely. He was not what is called a brilliant man, but a sober observer and worker. He was the founder of the Presbyterian Union Seminary, now removed to Richmond after a long career in Prince Edward County. Pastor of a church in Richmond for ten years after 1812, Dr. Rice established in 1818 the organ from which the extract given herewith is drawn. This periodical he continued to edit for five years after his removal to Prince Edward County to build up the seminary, or graduate school in theology, he set going.

In Prince Edward County Dr. Rice was thrown intimately with Jonathan P. Cushing, President of Hampden-Sidney College, a layman of the Episcopal Church, whose interests were predominantly for the exact sciences. These two men organized at Hampden-Sidney, in January 1824, a Literary and Philosophical Society, which had an existence of about ten years. Dr. Rice died the summer of 1831. In September of that year Mr. Cushing furthered the organization of an ambitious society for the study of common school methods in the State and the betterment of conditions in the common schools, (see *Richmond Enquirer*, Sept. 6th, 1833). Mr. Cushing was well known in the State as a man of ideas and accomplishments. In 1831 William and Mary made an effort to secure his services, as Washington College (Washington and Lee), had done earlier.

December 29th, 1831, the first effective move was made towards the establishment of the Virginia Historical and Philosophical Society. President Cushing was the 1st Vice-President of the Society at the organization, and continued so until his death in 1835. The aims of the Society from 1831 as late

as 1847, (at the reorganization when the title "Philosophical" was dropped), were perhaps more philosophical than historical. Joseph Martin in 1835 dedicated his invaluable *Gazetteer* to the Society as a body constitutionally interested in topography and internal improvements and in the utilization of the physical resources of the State. And Mr. Cushing at the conclusion of his address in 1833, before the first formal meeting of the Society, spoke of its purposes 'to advance the various sciences and the useful arts and to create and diffuse a taste for intellectual improvement among our citizens.'

More than one agent is necessary to the setting up of intellectual machinery. But other evidence lacking, the suggestion is offered that the impulse to the Virginia Historical and Philosophical Society came from Hening through Dr. Rice to Mr. Cushing. The late Mr. B. B. Minor in his *History of the Southern Literary Messenger* mentions Mr. Cushing twice as the 'real founder' of the Society. And the *Literary Messenger* itself made the statement (Vol. II, 165—biographical sketch of President Cushing) that Mr. Cushing "actively engaged in establishing and fostering the Virginia Historical and Philosophical Society."]

A. J. MORRISON.