Society Has a Treasure-Trove of Revolutionary War Materials

Since Minnesota in the late eighteenth century was largely a wilderness far from the main events of the American Revolution, one might expect to find little dating from that war in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. However, the society has a surprising amount of material from the Revolutionary War period. Following are reports on significant letters from the Revolution in the society's manuscripts division and on the more modest museum possessions from that era. There is also a short report on library holdings. – Ed.

Yorktown Campaign Is Featured in Allyn K. Ford Collection

Lydia Lucas

The Minnesota Historical Society is fortunate among midwestern institutions to own a rich trove of Revolutionary War materials — especially part of its Allyn Kellogg Ford Collection of Historical Manuscripts. Of the more than 200 items in this collection which date between 1776 and 1783, nearly all pertain directly to the Revolution.

The Ford Collection as a whole contains more than 1,500 letters and documents of noted colonial and Revolutionary figures, military men, politicians, authors, clergymen, educators, business leaders, and others prominent in cultural and public affairs. Gathered over a period of thirty-five years by Minneapolis businessman Allyn K. Ford, the collection is far more than a large group of autographs, for Ford purposefully sought out items that expressed their writers' personalities, lives, and times. The Revolutionary War papers, most of them written in the field by men under pressure, furnish an especially graphic insight into a critical period of American history.

The genesis of Ford's collection was his acquisition in 1927 of 122 letters received by George Weedon, aide-de-camp to General George Washington during the early years of the Revolution and later commander of Virginia militia at Fredericksburg and Gloucester, Virginia. Among the Weedon items are letters from some of the most famous Revolutionary officers and Founding Fathers, including Washington, the Marquis de Lafayette and his aide-de-camp James McHenry, Thomas Jefferson, Baron von Steuben, Richard Henry Lee, and Thomas Nelson.

Most of the Weedon letters were written in 1781, reflecting the progress of the Virginia campaign that culminated in the surrender on October 19 of Lord Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown. This defeat was fatal to the British cause. The letters illustrate the logistical problems of day-to-day management of troop move-
ments and supply; raising, arming, and administering the militia; and preparing defenses both on the penin­
sulas of the York, James, and Rappahannock rivers and in the upriver counties.

Several letters discuss Benedict Arnold’s attack on Richmond, Virginia, in January, 1781, after he defected to the British. Others treat the colonials’ subsequent efforts to mobilize a force that could trap and capture Arnold. As spring approached, there was increasing concern about how to enlist and rotate the militia, about the expense of maintaining it, and about the persistent shortage of arms and provisions. Governor Thomas Jefferson wrote on January 21 of one way in which the colony handled such matters: “The money press has not yet got to work. As soon as it does I shall be very glad to have money furnished for the purpose of enlisting men...”

These problems became increasingly acute as the British forces prepared to invade Virginia, threatening the coastal cities as well as the interior. The letters detail British army and navy movements and the Virginians’ efforts to counter them. Neither troops nor arms nor supplies seemed adequate to the task. On May 10 Richard Henry Lee wrote in despair from Chantilly, Virginia, that “We have no military experience, no Artillery, little ammunition, and no Cavalry at present” and predicted a “catastrophe.” Lafayette reported on June 13 that “we are entirely destitute” and begged for clothes and shoes. “Want of These and of every necessary will put it out of our power to Move,” he added.

Other letters discuss defense preparations in the lower counties, cooperation with the approaching French fleet, and Lafayette’s and Steuben’s operations against Cornwallis and Colonel Banastre Tarleton, British cavalry officer, in May and June, 1781. Towards the end of June, the British evacuated Richmond, and the colonials anticipated foraging parties into the interior. Throughout July they were uncertain of Cornwallis’ movements and watched him closely, while John Peter Muhlenburg, Lutheran clergyman turned Continental general, gave details on July 29 of Lafayette’s and Anthony Wayne’s defeat on July 6 in a sharp skirmish with the British army at Green Spring, Virginia. By August 6 Lafayette was reporting that “The enemy are fortifying at York,” and over the next few days he repeatedly asked for as many weapons and as much cavalry as could be sent him.

Writing in Philadelphia in July, 1781, William Grayson, commissioner of the Board of War and former Virginia soldier, was still worried that “How the Army [in Virginia] is to be covered this fall, I believe no body can even guess at,” but letters in August and September reflected increasing confidence in the militia and in the army’s defense preparations. On September 1 Lafayette reported the arrival of the French fleet under its admiral, Count de Grasse, and on September 18 Joseph Jones, a Virginia representative in the Continental Congress, felt there is “good reason to expect success ag’t Cornwallis.” The colonials put together a force at Gloucester to besiege Yorktown, and Weedon was called upon to handle numerous details of manpower and supply.

Finally, on October 17, Jonathan Trumbull, secretary to George Washington, reported that “the General this Day received a Letter by flag from Ld Cornwallis, proposing that 2 officers from each Side might be appointed to consult on proposals for his surrender of the Ports of York & Gloucester. [W]e shall soon know whether the whole is a farce — or if his Lordship is in earnest.” He was indeed in earnest, for two days later he formally surrendered his army. Subsequent letters from Washington, Nelson, and General Arthur St. Clair to Weedon gave instructions on handling the British prisoners and their arms.

IN ADDITION to the Weedon papers, with their intimate glimpses into the Virginia campaigns, other aspects of the war are also represented by letters of prime historical importance. A fascinating letter by David Hume, British philosopher and government official, to Lord Hertford in 1766 is one of the most significant in the entire Ford Collection. Hume spent six closely written pages describing discussions in Parliament over the repeal of the Stamp Act: Sir William Pitt’s famous speech against the act, divisions over the vote, reasons behind the House of Commons’ decision to repeal, and the intrigues of Lord Bute, former prime minister, and the cabinet against each other.

The collection includes letters from thirty-one of the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence. Many of these were written during the Revolutionary War and give additional insights into its military and civilian conduct. Another small group of letters and documents was penned by soldiers and civilians in New England and Pennsylvania during the campaigns of 1777-79.

Evidence for the operation of a military draft is present in a letter of March 26, 1778, to Washington from his stepson, John Parke Custis, in Virginia: “I think We have now offered the most generous Terms and if they do not inlist they must be drafted.” Writing from Yorktown, his home town, on March 26, 1778, Thomas Nel-
son, another signer, informed Weedon that young people were so incensed at being singled out in the draft that few have volunteered for military service, while on June 21, 1781, Richard Henry Lee told Weedon of a plan to levy Virginia's militia from counties according to population.

A series of fifteen letters from a New Hampshire soldier named Nathan Hale (not the executed spy) to his wife Abigail in 1775-77 discusses military activities near Boston, Massachusetts; winter quarters in New York City, "one of the wickedest places this side of Hell"; and military operations in Canada, on Lake Champlain, and finally at Ticonderoga, New York, in 1777, some two years after the American capture of the fort. Meanwhile, British officer William Phillips issued orders on July 5, 1777, for the attack the following day that occupied Ticonderoga during General John Burgoyne's offensive and captured the New Hampshire Hale as he retreated with his company.

Several references to smallpox among the troops hint at the fear that this scourge engendered before an effective vaccine became widely available. Letters to Weedon in 1778 from Richard Henry Lee (March 14) and Washington (March 20) give specific instructions for isolating new troop levies from sources of contagion and for preparing them for smallpox inoculation. And on August 16, 1780, Benedict Arnold wrote to Timothy Pickering, quartermaster general of the Continental Army, requesting the supplies with which he intended to stock West Point, New York, for surrender to the British. Five weeks later, his plot exposed, he fled the fort.

Written by many different people — soldiers, officers, civilians, government officials — over the entire scope of the war, these letters convey the impression of a people who knew what they were about, who were firmly confident, not of ultimate victory perhaps, but certainly of themselves.

Scores of MHS Museum Items Date to American Revolution

Virginia L. Rahm

Among the many thousands of items in the Minnesota Historical Society's museum collections are scores of artifacts dating back to the colonial period and to the Revolutionary War. These are not only part of the history of the areas in which they originated but also in one important sense are part of the history of Minnesota. When restless settlers and entrepreneurs pushed westward from Maine, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and other eastern states, they brought with them what possessions they could: tools, weapons, dishes, flatware, clothing, quilts, and other practical household goods, along with a few "nonessentials" — heirlooms and mementos — to their new frontier homes. Many of these things were passed down from one generation to the next, often accompanied by a bit of history or family lore. The Minnesota Historical Society museum has acquired a small, but interesting and in some respects representative, sampling of Revolutionary War items through donation and, occasionally, purchase.

A few artifacts are directly connected with the Revolution: weapons and other military accouterments that are said to have been used in the war. One of the most interesting of these is a leather-covered dispatch box lined with military orders. It belonged to an Osbert Lachrop, who, according to museum records, served in the quartermaster's corps of the Continental Army under General Artemas Ward. The date of the box is 1775. The exterior is decorated with brass studs and handle and the initials "O. L." Inside the box are tantalizingly incomplete fragments of information and orders, dotted with names like General Philip J. Schuyler, Ticonderoga, and such Massachusetts counties as Suffolk, Barnstable, and Essex in which officers and men were raised in 1775 to reinforce the American army. The box was part of the Harry D. Ayer Collection. Mr. and Mrs. Ayer were benefactors of the society, their most important single gift being the Mille Lacs Indian Museum near Vineland. They gave most of the Indian artifacts, a new building in which to house the Indian collection, about 100 acres of land, and a trust fund to establish and maintain the museum. The dispatch box belonged to an H. D. Foster. Since Mrs. Ayer's maiden name was Foster, the box was probably passed down from one generation to the next until the Ayers gave it to the MHS museum.

There are two cavalry sabers and one sword in the collection, all three said to have belonged to British
The museum also owns a red-and-white British uniform dating from the late 1700s, but it was never worn in battle against the Americans. It was the outfit of a Simon George Johnston, who was born in England in 1768, served under the Duke of Wellington, and later was one of Wellington's bodyguards. Johnston emigrated to the United States and apparently wore the uniform while he was a member of the New York National Guard—military apparel in this country not being very uniform in earlier years. Johnston later moved West and died at Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin, in 1846.

MONEY to finance the war and the newly emerging nation was as important as weapons in the Revolutionary period. The museum has examples of currency issued by the colonies and by the Continental Congress. According to Eric P. Newman in his The Early Paper Money of America (Racine, Wisconsin, 1967), the United States was the first country in the Western World in which a government issued publicly sponsored paper money, although as early as the fourteenth century Marco Polo brought back news about paper currency being used in the Orient.

In early years there was very little money circulating in the American colonies. What money was brought by the early settlers was fairly quickly spent on English imports. Moreover, England had a policy of withholding such coins as American colonists might receive in trade. The mother country also prohibited the colonies from minting their own coins. Thus, bartering was the most widespread system of exchange, but it was cumbersome. In 1690, however, the Massachusetts Colony issued “bills of credit” that are considered the first real paper money in western countries. These bills of credit soon spread throughout the other colonies.

In May, 1775, the Continental Congress began issuing paper currency—“continental bills”—in an attempt to finance the war. The steady depreciation in value of these bills, because they had little real backing and partly because of England’s constant economic warfare against their use, inspired the phrase, “not worth a continental.” The states also continued to issue their own money. The museum has some fine examples of early state and federal currency.

Most of the other Revolutionary War items in the collection are of a more domestic nature. There are examples of samplers painstakingly embroidered by
young girls in the household as part of their education and upbringing. One of the samplers bears, indistinctly, the date 1776. A bugle and flute, which are said to have been used for a time in a Boston church choir about 1790 (pianos or violins were considered unsuitable for some churches), are part of the collection.

Also in Boston in 1790, Josiah Snelling, eventually to become commandant of Fort Snelling in Minnesota in 1820, was a six-year-old boy and owner of the little blue silk suit shown in this issue. About 100 years later, his granddaughter, Marion Snelling Hall, then five years old, modeled the suit for a photographer. Miss Hall gave the society the suit and the photograph.

Other heirlooms preserved in the museum range from a brown homespun, linsey-woolsey dress (said to have been worn by a little girl in Massachusetts during the Revolutionary War), to a meat jack, to delicate, hand-wrought silver sugar tongs, pewter spoons, quilts, eyeglasses, and other artifacts that help depict life in the United States at the time of its formation as a free nation.

The library of the Minnesota Historical Society also has a large collection of materials dealing with the period of the American Revolution. Most of it, however, was published after the war. Unique in the collection is a set of approximately 220 pamphlets dating from 1752 to 1787. This is generally referred to as the "Revolutionary War Pamphlet Collection," and, indeed, many of the items do refer to the war, the events leading up to it, and its aftermath. There also are a number of works dealing with the relations of Great Britain with its other colonies, particularly Ireland and Canada.

The library purchased the pamphlet collection in 1873, but no records have been found identifying the source from which it was acquired. Most of the pamphlets were published in London, although a few bear American imprints. The works by American authors in the collection are mainly reprints for English readers. Many were issued by John Almon, a London bookseller and journalist who was a friend of Edmund Burke and other members of the Whig opposition party in Parliament. At present there is no guide to the complete collection, but work is being done to catalog the entire set as a bicentennial project.
Canteen (above) and four powder horns

Sword hilts (above and right) show contrasts between a crude, hand-forged one, an ornate brass one with mother-of-pearl lion's head for a pommel, and one with a handsome, open-worked guard.

Sabers and sword shown with their sheaths

A sheet of uncut paper currency, in eight different denominations, issued in 1778 by the Continental Congress.
BLUE SILK SUIT worn by Josiah Snelling in about 1790 and same suit worn by his five-year-old great-granddaughter in late nineteenth century

BRITISH UNIFORM of late 1770s, front view, above, and back view

COMMON SENSE: ADDRESSED TO THE INHABITANTS OF AMERICA, On the following subjects

I. Of the Origin and Design of Government in general, with relative Remarks to the English Constitution.
II. Of Tyranny and Hereditary Government.
III. Thoughts on the present State of American Affairs.
IV. Of the present State of America, with some Reflections.
A NEW EDITION, with several Additions to the Body of the Work. To which is added an APPENDIX; together with an Addresst to the People called QUAKERS.

PHOTOGRAPHS by Eugene D. Becker.

SAMPLER with the date, 1764, embroidered into it

TITLE PAGE of Common Sense by Thomas Paine, one of the pamphlets in the library collection

PHILADELPHIA (printed),