

Peter Stephen Du Ponceau commonplace book, 1820
1820
Mss.B.D92c

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Summary Information

Repository	American Philosophical Society
Creator	Du Ponceau , Peter Stephen, 1760-1844
Title	Peter Stephen Du Ponceau commonplace book, 1820
Date	1820
Call number	Mss.B.D92c
Extent	1.0 Volume(s) 1 volume, 150 p.
Extent	1 volume, 150 p.
Location	LH-MV-E-1; LH-MV-E-14
Language	English
Container	1
Abstract	There are notes on the colonial history of Pennsylvania, with emphasis on William Penn and his family, the Society of Friends, James Logan, and the charters granted by Penn, with some notes on the study of languages and definition of words.

Background note

Born at St-Martin de Ré, France, on June, 1760, Du Ponceau received his education at a Benedictine college, where he demonstrated a facility for languages. His uncommon knowledge of English led to ridicule by his schoolmates, who nicknamed him L'Anglois for his habit of carrying around an English Classic in his pocket. A bit of jealousy may have been at play as Du Ponceau, though he rarely studied, received all of the premiums at the end of each year. The disdain was mutual: Du Ponceau scorned his fellow students for their tendency to merely memorize and repeat their lessons.

Dissatisfied with the scholastic philosophy taught at the college, Du Ponceau left the school after eighteen months. Du Ponceau's mother wanted him to enter the priesthood. In an effort to persuade him, the priest reportedly evoked feelings of guilt and remorse by reminding Du Ponceau of his failure to cry at his father's death. Under the combined pressure of his mother and the unnamed priest, DuPonceau agreed to enter the seminary under the condition that they would not require him to enter the priesthood after he completed his studies. He completed his studies, but did not enter the priesthood. Instead, at the age of 17, he set out for America with Baron von Steuben and served as Steuben's secretary in the Revolutionary army, with rank of captain, until illness forced his resignation in 1781. He settled in Philadelphia, where he studied law, was admitted to the bar, and established a law practice.

Elected to the American Philosophical Society in 1791, he served as secretary for and primary force behind the Society's Historical and Literary Committee. One of the most active committees in the Society's history, the Historical and Literary Committee provided much of the impetus for the early growth of the Society's Native American Indian linguistic collections. During DuPonceau's tenure as secretary, the Committee laid the foundation for the Society's development into one of the premier centers for the study of Native American Indian languages.

A member of the Society during the era in which Thomas Jefferson served as president of the American Philosophical Society as well as president of the United States, Du Ponceau collaborated with Albert Gallatin on a volume of Indian vocabularies commissioned by Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson wished to demonstrate the relationships between Indian tribes based on the similarities or differences of their languages. DuPonceau and Gallatin found that a correlation did exist between similarity of language and the length of time since the tribes had migrated to other regions.

His memoir on the grammatical system of the Indian languages (*Mémoire sur le système grammatical des langues de quelques nations Indiennes de l'Amérique du Nord*) won the Volney prize of the French Institute in 1835 and his writings continue to inspire scholars to this day. In addition to his works on Indian languages, DuPonceau wrote on the Chinese system of writing, then largely a puzzle to most Europeans.

An active and influential scholar, Du Ponceau served, simultaneously at one point, as president of not only the American Philosophical Society, but also of the Athenaeum and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. During his years as president of the Society, from 1827 until his death in 1844, the Society expanded its linguistics collection to a degree not seen again until the 20th century.

Administrative Information

Publication Information

American Philosophical Society

Provenance

Acquisition Information

Presented by Du Ponceau estate and accessioned, 1844 (1844 2767).

Indexing Terms

Genre(s)

- Commonplace Book
- Manuscript Essays

Geographic Name(s)

- Philadelphia (Pa.) -- History -- Colonial period, ca. 1600-1775.

Personal Name(s)

- Logan, James, 1674-1751
- Penn, William, 1644-1718.

Subject(s)

- Language and languages
- Linguistics.
- Literature, Arts, and Culture

- Pennsylvania History
- Quakers -- Pennsylvania.

Other Descriptive Information

The Peter Stephen Du Ponceau Collection has a wide array of material. This entry refers primarily to a commonplace book Du Ponceau had that contains interesting notes on colonial Pennsylvania history and especially William Penn's legacy (B D92c). Written in 1820, the notes can lend insight into the public and historical memory in early nineteenth century Philadelphia.

Related to this entry, some of his correspondence also involves his attempt to acquire documents from prominent Philadelphians so that the APS could publish a complete history of Pennsylvania. In addition to Du Ponceau's own efforts, Deborah Norris Logan corresponded with DuPonceau about her own attempt to write a history of Pennsylvania. The Deborah Logan correspondence also touches upon women's roles in the early republic, with Logan writing that she felt uneasy publishing something in her name "before the publick" because of her "sex and station."

What follows is a general summary of the rest of the Du Ponceau Collection. As a leading linguist of the era, the Du Ponceau's collection has three portions that relate to language. The first is a large volume of 73 Indian languages for both South and North American Indians (497 In2). The second is a nine volume set of notes on philology that focuses on Native American languages but includes notes on range of other language groups, such as the language of Polynesians and Greeks (410 D92). The notes also make numerous observations about Native American customs, practices, and beliefs. The third portion of linguistic material is a dictionary of terms relating to the sea and seafaring (359.03 D92).

Although Du Ponceau is most well-known today for his work in Native American linguistics, the Du Ponceau Collection includes a significant amount of correspondence from Du Ponceau's legal career in the nineteenth century (B D92p). As a practicing lawyer often working on trade issues, his correspondence also includes large collection of business news and legal affairs happening in Philadelphia. Most of these documents are from cases Du Ponceau worked on, and many of these cases involve international trade and merchant concerns. One of the more interesting case files includes a brief on whether or not the family of a mariner lost at sea can recover lost wages.

Du Ponceau was well-connected and some of his correspondence involves research on American Indians, language, and other intellectual endeavors (410.D92.1). He corresponded with many individuals throughout the U.S. and fellow members of the American Philosophical Society, sometimes as official APS business.