

**Peter Stephen Du Ponceau letters, 1816-1822,
to John Gottlieb Ernestus Heckewelder
1816-1822
Mss.Film.1162**

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Summary Information

Repository	American Philosophical Society
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Abstract	These are eighteen letters that mostly concern Indian linguistics. Regarding Zeisberger's Onondaga grammar and dictionary; Heckewelder's writings on the Indians; publications; question of whether or not any of the Lenape can pronounce the letter "r."

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, Du Ponceau 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 Du Ponceau'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. Du Ponceau 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, Du Ponceau 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

Restrictions

Restrictions on Use

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Provenance

Acquisition Information

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Originals in State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Indexing Terms

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- Microfilm Collection

Personal Name(s)

- Heckewelder, John Gottlieb Ernestus, 1743-1823

Subject(s)

- Indians of North America--Languages
- Linguistics.

Other Descriptive Information

This is a microfilm of an early American collection that may be of interest to researchers at the APS and may complement an original manuscript collection at the APS.