

Syracuse University

SURFACE

The Courier

Libraries

Spring 1976

A Delayed Discovery

June Potash

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/libassoc>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Potash, June. "A Delayed Discovery." The Courier 13.1 (1976): 29-33.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Courier by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.



Page from Book of Hours, Syracuse University, Bird Library, Smith MS 36, f.88r.

THE COURIER

Table of Contents

SPRING 1976

	Page
Smith MS 36: A Study in Fifteenth Century Manuscript Illumination Gloria K. Fiero	3
A Delayed Discovery June Potash	29
News of the Library and Library Associates	34

Washington October 1st 1863

Maunsell B. Field, is hereby appointed
to discharge the duties of Assistant Secretary of
the Treasury, during the absence of George Harrington,
the Assistant Secretary. -
Abraham Lincoln

A Delayed Discovery

by June Potash

My personal definition of an antiquarian is someone whose fondest day-dream is of exploring the attic of an old house and finding a trove of rare, important, exciting, or at least interesting books and letters. If such an event should befall a non-antiquarian the nonchalance and even apparent stupidity of the treasure-finders would dismay and astonish the antiquarian. Such was the case with our discovery of a cache of letters, notes, calling cards, clippings and memorabilia, the value and interest of which has only just come to light after a period of neglect and disinterest on our part.

Some eight years ago when we bought our first house, a recently remodelled “cottage” in the town of Cazenovia, New York, we heard stories from previous owners and neighbors about Maggie Field, the original owner. An eccentric such as small country towns still tolerate, if not treasure, Maggie Field was a born pack rat who apparently never threw out a newspaper or piece of string, kept every box, bag and letter that ever came into her house. We were told that before her death, the house was a warren of tiny passage ways through rooms piled ceiling high with clutter. Upon her death much of the trash was simply trucked to the town dump – although, considering the reputation of “Michigan”, the local name for the dump, it was probably sorted through by “collectors” and proprietors of “Junque Shoppes.” Eventually several pieces of furniture were discovered beneath the piles of paper and clothing and finally an auction of household belongings was held. When the house had been emptied, it was purchased by a young couple who gutted it and rebuilt it into the very appealing, cozy home that had attracted us.

We heard a rumor of a fabulous diamond that had been hidden in the attic and became curious enough to push open the trap-door and poke our heads into the dusty, summer-hot attic, only to discover that it, like the rest of the house, had been well cleaned out. However, on the property were two other buildings, a barn and a garage, rather small buildings with tiny attics. We found several copies of ancient *National Geographics*, a normal school diploma and a few old *Collier's* magazines in the barn. It was our first house, we had small children, were making new friends and my husband was busy establishing himself in a family medical practice in the town. We did not care about crumbling old magazines and wished to do a certain amount of further remodelling in the house and plantings in the lawn. We did not explore the attics of the two out-buildings. At my parents' first visit, however, my

Dr. and Mrs. Joel Potash made a gift of the Maunsell B. Field scrapbooks to Syracuse University Library Associates to be auctioned at their First Annual Antiquarian Book Auction for the benefit of the Syracuse University Libraries.

mother, whose curiosity has always been one of her most lively and sparkling traits, decided to take a look at the two neglected attics. She reported to us, after drawing down the retractable ladder in the garage, that there were barrels of old shoes up there and piles of old magazines, as well as bats and nests of mice, hornets and small birds. Moldering old shoes did not pique our curiosity and the possibility of being attacked by one of the attics' denizens was forbidding.

The following summer, however, on a sweltering August day, a middle-aged man in a scholar's wrinkled seersucker suit arrived at the door with his chignon-ed wife. He introduced himself as a Mr. MacDougal and explained that he was writing a book on a member of the Field family and searching for old documents pertaining to various members of the family. He had traced the house at the county records office in Wampsville, then come to Cazenovia and inquired the location at a gas station. He wondered if there might be any old diaries, scrapbooks or such about the premises. "I don't think so," I told him.

"Have you explored the attics?" he asked.

"Well, no, not really," I said. "We know there's a lot of old magazines out in the garage and barn attics and that the house attics are clean of everything but dust-balls."

"Would you mind if I look in the attics?" he asked.

"Go right ahead," I welcomed him. "I'll even get you a flashlight."

Mr. and Mrs. MacDougal disappeared into the back of the property for nearly an hour and then reappeared at the door covered with sweat-streaked dirt and dust, returning the flashlight and clasping two crumbling old scrapbooks. "We found a couple of scrapbooks. One has quite a few clippings and the other has several calling cards. There are even some things in Arabic in the back. We don't know if they are of any value at all but we'd like to look at them," Mr. MacDougal said. "Would you mind if we took them up to the Lincklaen House this evening and looked over them? We'll bring them back in the morning."

To tell the truth, even at this point, the initial discovery of the scrapbooks, I was not very interested. I just thought how hot and tired both MacDougals looked and that my children were also hot and tired and irritable and I didn't wish to be a friendly small town hostess and invite them in for a cold drink. I was glad enough to tell them it would be just fine if they went to the hotel, cooled off and looked at the scrapbooks at their leisure.

When the MacDougals returned the next morning, they explained that they found the scrapbooks interesting although they did not seem particularly valuable. They explained also that the Field family had been involved in both the political and literary life during the latter half of the eighteen hundreds. Their particular interest was in the literary branch, a certain Jason Field, who had written a series of diaries about his meetings with the literary figures of the day, particularly during a rather long stay in England where he

also had become acquainted with several members of the royal family. However, Mr. MacDougal explained, the scrapbooks had apparently belonged to Maunsell B. Field, an uncle to Jason. Maunsell Field had been assistant secretary of the treasury during Lincoln's presidency. He had also been ambassador to France and been sent on political missions to the Middle East. For a time he had also been something of an entrepreneur and so had known several of the entertainment world personalities of the day. The MacDougal's mentioned calling cards from Jenny Lind and P. T. Barnum in the scrapbook.

While our curiosity was now somewhat aroused, we did not imagine that these two very soiled and crumbling scrapbooks could contain anything of much value. When Mr. MacDougal suggested he would like to take the material to his summer home in Connecticut and show it to a museum at which he had been doing research, we agreed.

That we were either lucky or very good judges of character, is something that can best be understood in the clear light of hindsight. Mr. MacDougal gave us his name and address on a slip of paper and left town. We did not hear from him again during the remaining three years we lived in the house. However, when we were negotiating the sale of that house and the purchase of another in the same town, we remembered the scrapbooks and wondered if they ought not be kept for the future owners who seemed more excited about the purchase of an older home than we had been. So we wrote a note to Mr. MacDougal asking "What's become of our scrapbooks?"

After a few weeks, he replied that he still had them, but that they were too valuable to send through the mails. He suggested we take a trip to his area and pick them up. Our doubts began to rise and we thought he might be bluffing, having either lost them or found them actually to be valuable and sold them. My husband wrote a simple note saying something like "We don't care how valuable they are, just put them in a box and send them to us." A couple of weeks later a somewhat battered, obviously used, college laundry box arrived by parcel post from Mr. MacDougal. It contained the two scrapbooks. Having had to hassle a little to get them back, and wanting to know what it was we were contemplating turning over with the house, we sat down and looked through the scrapbooks. We discovered a sizable collection of calling cards, some autographed and some not, from such well-known people as Horace Greeley, Millard Fillmore, Washington Irving, and Alexis de Toqueville.

Among the cards were two small notes signed by Abraham Lincoln, one written entirely by him and the other written in another script but signed by Lincoln. Although we had no idea what a Lincoln autograph was worth, we knew that this was something we preferred to keep. We read on and found several letters in the difficult (to our eyes) script of the day from various political figures. We did not read all of them; our interest in and knowledge of the Civil War period is not great. However, we realized that this collection was something which should be appraised and that it would probably be best turned over to a museum or library or private collection of some sort. We

wrote letters of inquiry to two or three universities and spoke with two or three acquaintances, including our lawyer, who was a member of the Library Associates affiliated with Syracuse University.

Since our own excitement was relatively mild and our lives busy, once again, with fixing up a new-to-us house, the laundry box with the scrapbooks was put into a closet and left there again for nearly five years.

As chance would have it, in the fall of 1975 my husband spoke with someone else associated with the Syracuse University Library Associates. They were just beginning to plan an auction of antiquarian items for the benefit of the library. Within a few days the chairman of the event, Mr. Sid Wechter, telephoned and asked if he might see the scrapbooks, and an appointment was made. His initial reaction was cautious, but curious and mildly excited. Mr. Wechter asked to take the scrapbooks home to read through thoroughly, in order to get an idea whether they might contain a cohesive collection that would be salable as such. Staying up until late at night, gently turning the crumbling pages and sighing sadly over water stains and mildew marks, Mr. Wechter became more and more excited about the collection and called the following day to say that he thought some of the letters contained information of historical worth. He wanted to take the scrapbooks to Mr. Roger Butterfield who could give him an appraisal, being an expert on autographs and Civil War period documents.

So it was, that after several years of neglect, we at least realized precisely what we had found and that it was valuable and of historical interest and that it was wanted by the Library Associates for their spring 1976 auction. An auction being a here and now event, we find the prospect of attending it and seeing what becomes of our findings more exciting than we found the papers themselves.



The collection is apparently the personal scrapbooks of Maunsell B. Field, kept in chronological order. One scrapbook contains calling cards and letters, while the second consists entirely of newspaper clippings in both English and French (those from Paris at the time he lived there) which were pertinent to events Mr. Field either participated in or found of significance to himself. The most interesting of these clippings, to us at least, was the lengthy article written by Mr. Field as a letter to the editors of the *New York Times* giving in graphic detail his role at the time of President Lincoln's assassination. Mr. Field heard about the shooting and hurried to Mr. Lincoln's bedside. He was immediately sent out to find a certain doctor; then he returned to keep vigil with several other cabinet members and relatives until Mr. Lincoln's death — at which time Mr. Field became embroiled in an argument about whether it is more fitting to weight a dead President's eyes with silver or gold coins.

Maunsell B. Field seems to have been on the periphery of a great many interesting events during the period. Lincoln's initial impression of Field was anything but favorable. It seems that, at a large social gathering, Mr. Field kicked his top hat up to the ceiling. Mr. Lincoln thought this gesture so uncouth that he said he would not have such a person associated with his government. However, events made Mr. Field the only apparent choice for assistant secretary to the treasury and he was so appointed.

One of the more amusing letters in the collection refers to a ball at which Mr. Field was present. The ball was given in honor of the Prince of Wales upon his visit to America. Apparently, in that day building construction was not of stressed concrete and the society ladies did not yet subscribe to the belief that thin is chic, for Mr. Field notes the general consternation when a great number of ladies rushed to ask the Prince for a dance, and the floor collapsed beneath their weight.

Mr. Roger Butterfield has given Library Associates a copy of Maunsell B. Field's book, *Memories of Many Men and of Some Women: Being Personal Recollections of Emperors, Kings, Queens, Princes, Presidents, Statesmen, Authors, and Artists, at Home and Abroad, During the Last Thirty Years*. (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1874). The book contains anecdotal material based on the scrapbooks and, as can be seen from the subtitle, much more!

