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What is the Penn Manuscript Collective?

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Peter Stallybrass

THE PENN MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIVE
2015-

The Penn Manuscript Collective was formed in 2015, under the leadership of John Baranik and Nicole Flibbert, with the support of Peter Stallybrass and the staff of Rare Books and Manuscripts in the Kislak Center on the 6th floor of the Van Pelt Library. The aim of the collective has been to bring together Penn undergraduates to transcribe the most interesting of the letters, diaries, medical and culinary recipes, notes in printed books, government documents, religious texts, commonplace books etc. in Penn's own manuscript collection. We first met on 15 October 2015 and we have met once a month since then. The website of the Collective

<https://penmanuscriptcollective.wordpress.com>

gives a small sample of the work that we have been doing since then.

From our first meeting, most of us had little or no experience in transcribing manuscripts – and we encourage people who have never read a manuscript before to give it a try. It is extraordinary how fast most people can pick up the basics, whether it's analysing the hand of a seventeenth-century girl as she completes a certificate for her writing mistress, transcribing a letter from an eighteenth-century slave just after she has learned how to write, reading a fourteenth-century English translation of the New Testament, deciphering the corrections in one of Walt Whitman's early drafts of a poem, reading the lecture notes of a student attending a lecture by Benjamin Franklin on electricity, or examining the notes on the death of a child written in a sixteenth-century bible. We focus on English manuscripts, although the skills we learn can often be applied to manuscripts in other languages and from a wide range of periods. (See, for instance, John Baranik's blog on "Letters as Physical Objects" at the Collective's website, posted on 6 April 2016.)

We are now entering a new and exciting phase of the Collective's existence with three new digital forums so that we can preserve and publicize our work:

1. An online journal to publish both long and short pieces, based on our transcriptions. This has an undergraduate editorial board and a faculty/librarian supervisory board
2. An archive to preserve longer completed transcriptions of manuscripts and papers on Penn manuscripts
3. An open-access website that will show both what we have and what we are transcribing, that is subject to further revisions and additions

We are open to students working in any subject, field, or period and at any undergraduate or submatriculant level. And while we all do this because it is an extraordinary pleasure and privilege to have such access to the library's rare manuscripts, thanks to the active encouragement of the Kislak's staff at Penn, most of us have found that the discoveries that the Collective makes possible have become central to our course work from short seminar presentations to final papers to senior theses.

We encourage anyone working on Penn manuscripts to consider contributing to one or more of our new digital projects and we look forward to working with anyone interested in our monthly meetings. For information, please contact Natalie Burke at nburke@sas.upenn.edu.