

>> TREATMENT SPOTLIGHT

Sol Feinstone's Gift to America

Hundreds of thousands of immigrants passed through Ellis Island in 1902. Among these crowds, a penniless 14-year-old boy from Lithuania named Solomon Bialagrudsky (soon anglicized to Sol Feinstone) arrived determined to succeed. He was a true believer in the American dream, and his personal hero was George Washington.

Feinstone found employment in the sweatshops of New York City's Lower East Side, and spent much of his initial pay on evening courses to master the English language. His commitment to education continued, and eventually he earned a Masters degree in chemistry from Syracuse University. He worked for several years at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, and then turned his attention to Philadelphia real estate, earning a small fortune.

Many decades later, Sol Feinstone expressed his thanks to his adopted country with a unique gift, now regarded as an American treasure. For nearly 50 years, starting with small purchases and then steadily building momentum, Feinstone acquired the letters and manuscripts of America's founding fathers. Then he gave this collection to the American people through the establishment of the nonprofit David Library of the American Revolution, located near the Bucks County site of Washington's famous crossing of the Delaware.

The Sol Feinstone Collection comprises nearly 2,500 manuscripts documenting the founding years of the United States. Feinstone's personal hero George Washington is richly represented through more than 260 letters, but so are the other giants of the American Revolution. There are 65 letters by Thomas Jefferson, 55 letters by Alexander Hamilton, 40 letters by the Marquis de Lafayette, and 10 to 20 each by John Adams, Nathanael Greene, and James Madison. These are the stars, but the collection contains equally important letters from less-renowned participants, offering critical depth and background on America's revolutionary years.

As a brief taste of the collection's riches, the letters include a vivid account by an American soldier (a "Mr. Hood") of General Washington's brilliant night time retreat from Trenton and his attack on British forces at Princeton (1777), an elegant letter from Washington extending his expression of personal sympathy (coupled with firm patriotic resolve) to the captured General Burgoyne (1778), Jefferson's detailed ledger of the slaves he sold from 1784 to 1794, and a John Adams letter to John Marshall giving his

insightful opinion of George Washington and excoriating Alexander Hamilton (1806). Professor Gregory J.W. Urwin, Professor of History, Temple University, and a Fellow of the Company of Military Historians calls the collection "a window that allows us to read the heart of the American Revolution."

The David Library contacted CCAHA in 2006 for a conservation assessment of the manuscripts. The housing of the letters and manuscripts was almost entirely as it was when Feinstone first acquired them between the 1930s and 1970s. CCAHA conservators determined that the immediate threat to the collection was damage due to acidic paper folders and the over-filled, acidic document storage boxes in which they were stored. Some manuscripts showed considerable losses of text and paper caused by the corrosive iron gall ink used at the time, as well as damage from frequent folding of the paper, causing losses and failures on the creases. Some documents had been laminated using silk or cellulose acetate, both of which degrade over time, causing additional damage.

Through support from *Save America's Treasures* and The Pew Charitable Trusts, CCAHA is currently working on treatment and reformatting of the Sol Feinstone Collection. CCAHA conservator Samantha Sheesley is managing the treatment, with a team which includes Senior Paper Conservator Soyeon Choi, Conservator Rachel Wetzel, Mellon Fellow Jessica Silverman, and Conservation Assistant Heather Godlewski. Through this project, each document will be surveyed and rehoused, a portion of the collection will receive full conservation treatment, and hundreds of important letters will be digitized.

Because of their great national importance, CCAHA worked with the David Library on the proposals to fund the conservation of the Sol Feinstone Collection. In support of the *Save America's Treasures* application, noted historian and author David McCullough contributed his enthusiasm for the project, writing, "The Sol Feinstone Collection of rare Revolutionary War documents is a national treasure of the first rank, a window on our founding times like no other. Everything possible should be done to see that it is properly, responsibly cared for, and without delay. Its inestimable value to future generations demands no less." —LEE PRICE



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1 / Mellon Fellow Jessica Silverman treating David Library documents in order to slow the deterioration of the iron gall ink 2 / A letter from Thomas Jefferson, December 8, 1821 3 / Detail of a manuscript with John Hancock's signature, June 10, 1776