Traces of the Real: Autographomania and the Cult of the Signers in Nineteenth-Century America

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During the early nineteenth century a popular obsession with autograph collecting swept through the United States. Among such “autographomaniacs”, handwritten signatures belonging to the signers of the Declaration of Independence—and collections bringing together the signatures of all 56—soon emerged as the most rarified. The intersection of autograph collecting and the Declaration of Independence provides fertile terrain for exploring the performative and preservative functions of the signature. This paper examines the special nature of the signature as a privileged site of authenticity and, in the special context of the Declaration, as a site of ritual reenactment and collective memory.

Keywords: Signature; Memory; Autograph; Collecting; Declaration of Independence

Of late years it has become a favorite pastime with persons of taste and leisure to form collections, with more or less success, of the handwriting of those Fathers of the Republic who combined to trace that illuminated initial letter of American history known, the world over, as the Declaration of Independence. (Brotherhead iii)

During the early nineteenth century a curious passion for autograph collecting swept through the United States, first among a select group of antiquarian-minded individuals, then broadly among the general public—men, women, and children. The “cult of the autograph letter”, as termed by Cambridge librarian A. N. L. Munby, emerged in Europe during the sixteenth century and was a well-established avocation among the British patrician class before the eighteenth century. By European standards, Americans were slow to embrace the fad. However, by the end of the
nineteenth century popular interest in autographs was recognized as a veritable “mania”. The personal papers of deceased authors, statesmen, and Revolutionary war heroes were pillaged by zealous collectors, and living luminaries found themselves besieged with requests for signatures by so-called “autograph fiends”. In a journal entry dated January 9, 1857, American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote with palpable weariness, “Yesterday, I wrote, sealed, and directed seventy autographs. Today I added five or six more, and mailed them” (Hill 1).

From the beginning, American autograph collecting was ecumenical and comprehensive. Collectors actively sought signature specimens in the hands of noted figures, both past and present, who had achieved some degree of distinction in American life, from politics to literature, music, theology, education, and military leadership. Over time, scarcely an area of social or historical interest escaped the notice of autograph seekers. In even the most serious collections the hands of the hallowed and famous mingled with the merely sensational and macabre, including suicides and murderers (Mulder and Stouffer 10). From the vantage of the twenty-first century, many of these nineteenth-century notables now seem hopelessly obscure, a testament to the selectivity of historical memory. Who now recalls, for example, “Mrs. Elsing, formerly Miss Waterman”, a poetess whose signature Edgar Allan Poe reproduced in an 1841 article on the autographs of America’s “living literati” (234)?

Amid such fluctuating reputations and ever-evolving areas of collecting interest, however, one category in particular soon emerged as the most rarified among American collectors: the autographs of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence. To obtain a complete set of autographs from each of the “immortal fifty-six” was, as one commentator noted, “the ambition of all collectors of American autographs” (Weil 692). In a letter dated June 1835, author and collector Benjamin B. Thatcher described such a set as the “ne plus ultra of collectors” (Gratz 178). By the mid-nineteenth century this category of collecting was well established. “Indeed, so widely has this fashion spread, both at home and abroad,” observed the editor of an 1861 facsimile volume devoted to the Signers, “that every document, letter, or signature from the hand of a ‘Signer’ has become valuable, and the autographs of some of these worthies it is almost impossible to obtain. A complete set is of the extremest rarity” (Brotherhead iii).

The nineteenth-century zeal for autograph collecting, and the importance of the Signers in particular, raises interesting questions about the nature of the autograph as a material artifact and social mnemonic. What is the special significance of the handwritten signature? How do autographs embody and evoke the presence of the past? Or, drawing upon a concept introduced by Pierre Nora, how do autographs exist as “sites of memory”? It might be said that every signature is a memorial, an act of self-declaration performed in some present with an eye to the future. As legal evidence or an informal mark of self-attribution, the signature is a socially-binding token of remembrance. This is as true of the public signature enacting a presidential order as that sealing a private love letter; both serve as irreducible marks of evidence for a future audience, whether comprising millions or just one. In this sense, to sign is
to commit oneself to history, to recollection—or at least its possibility. But the signature itself is a social construction, and the process by which any given autograph becomes socially valuable is, like history itself, selective and purposeful.

The intersection of autograph collecting and the Declaration of Independence provides fertile terrain for exploring the performative and memorial dimensions of the signature. First, the Declaration itself is perhaps the most conspicuous display of signatory power in American history. The name of John Hancock, whose signature appears prominently on the document, became synonymous with the autograph signature in American parlance. The Declaration is America’s birth certificate, and the 56 signatures affixed to it literally mark, or “declare”, the sacred moment of the nation’s inception. If Jews, Christians, and Muslims are thought of as people of the book, then American nationals might be considered people of the signed document—specifically, the Declaration of Independence. But contrary to popular belief, the Declaration was not immediately recognized as a venerated relic. In fact, this did not occur until the early nineteenth century, when Americans suddenly became interested in documenting and commemorating the young nation’s originary past. And it was precisely during this time that the “cult of the Signers” emerged among America’s first generation of autograph collectors.

The rise of American autograph collecting, with its special interest in the Declaration, corresponded with another key nineteenth-century motif: the obsession with authenticity. The effort to “get closer” to reality—whether conceived of as spiritual, material, or psychological—is reflected in the two dominant intellectual-aesthetic movements of the nineteenth century, romanticism and realism. The popularity of autograph collecting is situated within both movements, as autographs came to be regarded as a special medium for conjuring intimacy with the past. In this view, the autograph is not simply a lifeless vestige of the past—an archival “trace”, as Nora might contend—but a living memorial that reveals the body in the process of writing itself. Though signed documents often serve the interests of official historians and institutional scholars, it is the autograph’s magical ability to summon the past in the present, to facilitate co-presence with the dead or absent in the physical space around the signature, that is its true power. Moreover, it was this aura of co-presence that set the autograph apart from other space- and time-traversing technologies, notably telegraphy and photography, that captivated nineteenth-century society.

This essay explores the development of nineteenth-century American autograph collecting and the cult of the Signers in the dual context of collective memory and ritual performance, as part of the vivification of national history and the desire for authenticity. Without offering a fully elaborated theory of the signature, a project that would be highly profitable in itself, this analysis is more narrowly aimed at studying the conditions under which the American autograph phenomenon emerged and the process by which the Signers attained special status in the pantheon of American collecting. By focusing on the Signers, it is hoped that a more general understanding of the signature as a historically- and culturally-specific site of reenactment and communion can be developed.
The Signature as Privileged Site

So much depends upon the hand-scrawled name. One need only observe the diverse contexts in which a handwritten signature is used—from personal checks to greeting cards to dry cleaning receipts—to grasp its fundamental importance in contemporary life. However, the signature itself is a social construction whose role as a material marker of authenticity and legitimacy is neither self-evident nor objective. Long after the invention of writing, which the signature presupposes, it was the seal that served as the authentic marker of personal identity in the ancient Near East, Asia, and the Mediterranean (see Collon). This priority is reflected in the etymology of the word signature, which derives from *signum* in reference to the impression made by a seal.

Yet sealing and signing serve essentially the same purpose: to provide a bridge between body and text whereby the physical act of sealing or signing attests to the act itself. Strictly speaking, it is not the seal or signature that is of the essence, but the action of the living actor to which it refers. This was reflected in the commonplace medieval practice of marking one’s signature with the symbol of the cross, a written indication that the signatory had literally made the ceremonial gesture of crossing him or herself in the Christian manner (Clanchy 294–327). As a form of oathing, it might be said that the signature embodies both *performative* and *preservative* features: the former in that it displays the moment of enactment, the latter in that such enactment is materialized and made permanent. Whereas writing makes language visible, signing renders the author present and, under the proper conditions of textual belief, immortal.

The signature has received little theoretical consideration; much of what does exist revolves around Austin’s brief remark on the subject and Derrida’s more substantial rebuttal. In considering the varieties of performative utterances, Austin suggests that a written inscription may be used in lieu of a verbal utterance to make an explicit statement when a self-attesting speaker (the “utterance-origin”) is absent. In such cases, he notes, the written signature must be appended because “written utterances are not tethered to their origin in the way that spoken ones are” (60–61). Derrida, however, dismisses the notion of the signature as a unique marker of identity and intention, a proposition that he claims is undone by the fact that the actual variability of one’s signature never matches the idealized, iterable version that serves as its model. Indeed, it is precisely such variation, such deviation from the model, that makes forgery possible. Nevertheless, Derrida grants the “enigmatic originality” of the individual signature and observes that it conveys a “transcendental form of presentness” by which the signer’s absence is “in some way inscribed, pinpointed in the always evident and singular present punctuality of the form of the signature.” Derrida the coy anti-foundationalist asks: “Does the absolute singularity of a signature as event ever occur? Are there signatures?” His answer: “Yes, of course, every day” (“Signature” 20).

Such statements concerning the reality of the signature only apply in textualized societies that recognize the signature as a valid form of attestation and attribution. In fact, the ascendancy of the handwritten signature as a site of authenticity is a
relatively new development. During the late Roman republic handwritten statements were incorporated into the formal assembly of legal documents, but only as a supplement to seals and subscriptions (the writing out of one’s name) (Meyer 210). Signatures in the modern sense, by which we mean the hand inscription of one’s personal name as a form of self-sufficient evidence, were apparently unknown. This can be attributed at least in part to technical limitations. According to Henig (88):

Roman cursive handwriting, at least the old Roman cursive which was predominant until the third century AD, was too undeveloped for signatures written in it to be recognised, without the accompaniment of a seal impression, by the recipient of a letter or by parties to a contract.

The development of more cursive-like scripts during the early medieval period might have better accommodated signatures, but their appearance after the fall of Rome coincided with greatly diminished rates of literacy. As a result, the “sign manual”, when it was used at all, usually consisted of a cross or monogram rather than a fully spelled-out name.

It was not until the thirteenth century in England that the signature began to gain acceptance as a valid form of authentication, but even then it remained subordinate to the seal, which had the advantage of not requiring literacy. The development of the signature was enmeshed in a larger, more momentous transition from oral to written memory in the medieval West, during which individuals gradually learned to trust written documents as reliable evidence over verbal oaths, symbolic objects such as pieces of turf and swords, or witness accounts, even when conveyed by the descendents of long-dead primary actors (Clanchy 254–60). This textual shift was greeted with resistance and uncertainty, as reflected in the simultaneous use of multiple seals, signatures, and witness lists to guarantee the authenticity of a single document; where no one standard prevailed, all forms were employed to hedge against doubt and ambiguity. The example of the English Magna Carta, to which the American Declaration was often compared during the nineteenth century, conveniently illustrates this development. Drawn up in 1215, the Magna Carta was sealed (not signed) by King John and an account of the embodied performance of witnessing and oath-making is embedded directly in the text: “Given by our hand in the meadow that is called Runnymede, between Windsor and Staines.” The American Declaration, by contrast, is dated and signed, but provides no indication of its physical place of origin, revealing the radical disembodiment of textuality; only the signatures provide a tenuous link between the immanent text and the bodies of those who authorize it.

By 1500 the use of signatures was increasingly common among the literate upper-classes of Europe, and modern autograph collections contain numerous examples from this period. “The age of autographs,” according to Madigan, “may be said to begin with the period of modern history—about the middle of the fifteenth century” (22). The invention of printing seems to have highlighted qualitative differences between manual and mechanical writing, as European interest in autograph collecting began to flourish shortly after the introduction of the press. By the late fifteenth
century students and travelers, particularly in Germany, began to carry small notebooks, *alba amicorum*, in which they had prominent figures, professors, and friends inscribe their names and a brief message (McNeil 29). Here the signature can be seen as a form of personal commemoration, whereby past relationships were recorded and, upon future perusal, revivified. The popularity of such notebooks subsequently spread to England and other parts of continental Europe, forming the first chapter in the history of autograph collecting. At the same time important private collections of historical documents and letters were established throughout Europe, many of which would end up in major national collections such as the British Museum and Bibliotheque Nationale as well as university libraries and the Vatican (Fields, “The History” 43–44).

Sixteenth-century interest in the autograph and the absolute contractual power of the signature is reflected in Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, in which the protagonist’s pact with the devil is consummated with a signature inked in blood, underscoring the connection between body, text, and soul—an eternal connection, no less. “The gesture that literally instigates this project,” one literary scholar observes, “is the performative act of signing in blood, where text written with the body becomes text written on the body” (Stott 29).

While the convention of signing one’s name is a modern development, the idiosyncratic nature of handwriting has long attracted interest as a special marker of individuality. Aristotle’s comment on handwriting is perhaps the earliest on record in the West, and the subject remained a source of passing speculation until the late eighteenth century, when handwriting analysis was incorporated into the new study of physiognomy. Physiognomy, as popularized by the Swiss theologian Johann Kasper Lavater in his multivolume work on the subject, posited that external features of the human body—particularly the shape of one’s facial features—corresponded to internal aspects of one’s disposition and moral character. Thus the contours and carriage of the body were believed to provide irrefutable evidence of one’s essential inner being. In an enlarged 1797 edition of his *Essays on Physiognomy* Lavater reported an empirical linkage between handwriting and individual character:

> The more I compare the different hand-writings which fall my way, the more I am convinced in the idea, that they are so many expressions, so many emanations, of the character of the writer. . . . It is beyond doubt, it is incontestable, that the handwriting is the *criterion* of regularity, taste, and propriety. (201–02)

The first full-length study of handwriting analysis was published by French scholar Edouard A. P. Hocquart, a follower of Lavater, in 1812, and other disquisitions on the topic soon followed (Thornton 74–76).

Although handwriting analysis—and its late-nineteenth-century formalization as graphology—sprang from the fount of Enlightenment rationalism, its focus on writing as a site of unconscious self-revelation belied a romantic impulse. Specifically, it was believed that in writing one let down one’s guard and unwittingly displayed the truth of the self. Hegel, linking the hand and handwriting to the essential self, wrote:

> That the hand . . . must represent the in-itself of the individuality in respect of its fate is easy to see from the fact that, next to the organ of speech, it is the hand most
of all by which a man manifests and actualizes himself. . . . [T]he hand gives a more durable existence than the voice does, especially in the particular style of handwriting. (189)

The signature thus came to be seen as not only an authentic site of authorial presence, but a verification of individuality, genius, and subjectivity.

It is significant that handwriting analysis from this period, although ostensibly based upon the methodical examination of manuscript documents in their entirety, invariably placed special emphasis on the signature. The frequency with which facsimile reproductions consist of signed autographed letters, rather than simply unsigned documents in the subject’s hand, testifies to this. Cloaked in the mantle of science, handwriting analysts—like “serious” history enthusiasts in nineteenth-century America—defended their high-minded pursuits while succumbing, privately and implicitly, to the mystique of the famous autograph. As one late-nineteenth-century champion of serious autograph collectors confidently remarked—after flatly denying the attraction of mere signatures—“No careful and experienced compiler of manuscripts need be asked whether handwriting bears marks of individuality that reveals personal traits. He knows all too well to entertain a doubt, that an autograph is a photograph of the mind” (A. A. E. Taylor 228). As a privileged site of memory, the signature served as a bridge between time and space, offering a medium through which one could commune with one’s forbears and kindred spirits.

**American Autograph Collecting and the Declaration**

American autograph collecting began during the second decade of the nineteenth century and by most accounts its founder was Reverend William Buell Sprague of Albany, New York (Fields, “The History” 46; Mulder and Stouffer 6). In 1816, before heading off to Princeton Theological Seminary to receive his religious training, Sprague served as a live-in tutor for the family of Major Lawrence Lewis, one of George Washington’s nephews. While at their estate near Mount Vernon, Sprague was granted permission by Bushrod Washington, another Washington nephew, to take as many of his uncle’s original letters as he wanted under the condition that he left copies of each. Seizing upon the opportunity, Sprague left with 1500 Washington documents and the nucleus of what would become the first major autograph collection in the United States. The fact that Washington’s original manuscripts were valued so little by his family reflects both the undeveloped state of American autograph collecting at that time and the nearness of the Revolutionary period and its leading figures to their immediate descendants. If the personal papers of Washington, the foremost hero of the young nation, were not sacrosanct, then it is hard to image which were. It was not until the Revolutionary generation began to die off—and their memory became imperiled—that such documentary ephemera would take on special meaning as national relics.

Early American autograph collectors such as Sprague and his closest contemporary competitor, Israel K. Tefft of Savannah, Georgia, benefited from their temporal proximity to the nation’s founding and the decentralized, unsystematic recordkeeping...
of the new government. In the absence of a national archive (an institution that would not exist until 1934) or long-established state and local antiquarian organizations, Sprague and other collectors often added to their collections by simply corresponding directly with the figures whose autographs they desired or by asking their family members for autograph specimens or permission to rummage through their homes. In 1833 Sprague returned to Washington's papers—by then bound and indexed in 200 volumes—and was permitted by its custodian to tear out a document bearing the autograph of Pennsylvania Signer James Smith. “You will perceive that it is a remarkably good autograph,” Sprague wrote to a fellow collector, “though it has suffered somewhat from the violence necessary to be used in withdrawing it” (July 24, 1833). Collectors, including Sprague and Tefft, traded extensively among themselves to mutual benefit (Fields, “Israel K. Tefft” 132; Maass 249–50; Mulder and Stouffer 7–8). Although jealous rivalries and accusations of misappropriation inevitably arose—Reverend Sprague, for instance, was suspected of having used his cleric’s frock to unfair advantage—in general, early American collecting was remarkably democratic. Unlike in England, where the choicest specimens of original manuscripts pertaining to that nation’s history were monopolized by wealthy antiquarians and aristocratic inheritors, in the United States, at least until the 1850s, a collector of modest means could amass an impressive collection of American autographs through mere persistence and cordiality.

Almost from the beginning American autograph collectors turned their attention to the Signers of the Declaration of Independence. Sprague is credited with conceiving of this special category and he completed the first set by 1834; before his death in 1876 he had amassed three complete sets (Draper 15). In establishing this category of collecting, Sprague initiated “a quest that was extremely contagious and that was to dominate the collecting pursuits of most of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century collectors” (Fields, “Israel K. Tefft” 46). According to Butterfield, a noted historical editor with the Massachusetts Historical Society:

The fad he had started quickly caught on. By 1830 or a little later, when Sprague had completed his first set of the ‘Signers,’ he already had formidable rivals, for there was no more genteel form of ancestor-worship than this, and the pickings were extraordinarily good in the years following the deaths of the Revolutionary generation. (1)

The idea seems to have passed from Sprague to Tefft, probably prior to Sprague’s visit to Tefft’s Savannah home in 1830. Interestingly, the second completed set was assembled not in America but in Britain, by Reverend Thomas Raffles, a collector based in Liverpool. Raffles, who corresponded with both Sprague and Tefft during the 1830s, seems to have had a complete set in his possession by 1835 (Broadley 323). Sprague sent Raffles many valuable autographs, including his indelicately culled James Smith specimen, to help him complete his set. Also around this time Robert Gilmor, a wealthy Baltimore merchant and art collector, was very near to completing his own set of Signers (Gratz 178). Tefft did not complete his set until 1845, but the conditions under which it was consummated border on fable. While visiting a client
near Savannah, he is said to have come across a wind-blown paper in the lawn. Upon inspection he discovered that it was an autograph document in the hand of Button Gwinnett, the Georgia patriot whose exceptionally rare signature—the last needed to complete his set—had eluded him until that moment.

The cult of the Signers evolved organically—that is, it was not the result of a government or institutional initiative—and it reflected broad public interest in memorializing the nation’s founding fathers. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the cult represented a type of anti-archive, as the relics of the nation’s founding were scattered and shared among various hands.

What is astonishing about these exchanges is the degree of trust that existed between Sprague and other collectors. Rarely were the trades negotiated in the strict sense; rather, Sprague would send or receive a selected group of autographs to or from another collector who would reciprocate on the same basis. (Mulder and Stouffer 8)

This changed during the second half of the century when the sale of autographs became more prevalent, as did the problem of forgery. Although perhaps strange in retrospect, early American collectors did not conceive of their hobby as one of prices and monetary values.

The enthusiasm with which early American collectors embraced the Declaration as an organizing category is significant in that it corresponded to a more general revival of the Declaration as a national symbol. Although now enshrined and venerated as a foundational document in American history, the Declaration was initially viewed as a statement of fact, a mere instrument of news dissemination that itself, as a material artifact, held no special intrinsic value. Moreover, Thomas Jefferson’s storied role as the document’s author was not generally known until after 1800 and not popularly celebrated until the 1820s (see McDonald). The evolution of the Declaration in American historical consciousness is a rich subject unto itself, and one that is well documented (see, for example, Detweiler; Maier). What is relevant to this study, however, is not how the Declaration came to be appreciated for its felicitous expression of democratic principle—alas, the originality of Jefferson’s ideas and phrasing is yet another aspect of the document’s historical construction—but how it came to be revered as a collection of “immortal” signatures.

The Declaration was officially approved by the Continental Congress on July 4 and copies of the document were immediately published and distributed throughout the colonies. News of the Declaration was greeted with much fanfare and in many cases the text was read aloud before large public audiences. The first printed copies included only the names of John Hancock, president of the Congress, and secretary Charles Thomson. What is misremembered is that the Declaration was not actually signed by Congress on July 4, the date upon which it is celebrated. The “engrossed” parchment now familiar to Americans was signed a month later, on August 2. Confusion over this point of detail afflicted two of the most prominent Signers, Jefferson and John Adams, who decades later erroneously recalled that the engrossed document had been signed on the fourth (Warren 242–46). The answer to why the Declaration was signed at all
remains unclear. The signing of petitions was not a convention of British parliament or a general practice in Europe, and several earlier petitions sent by the Continental Congress to the English monarch were unsigned (Maier 151–53). The purpose of the signatures, it seems, was a formal gesture of contractual agreement and moral solidarity among the delegates themselves. A signature on the Declaration was tantamount to treason and, in the event that the colonists lost their bid for independence, a crime punishable by death. They literally put their lives “on the line”. The Signers were keenly aware of the great personal risk that they were taking, and an atmosphere of gallows humor seems to have attended the proceedings. Hancock, the first to sign, steeled himself with the exaggerated bravado of his large autograph. “There! John Bull can read my name without spectacles and may now double his reward of £500 for my head” (Unger 241). Another unconfirmed but popular anecdote has Hancock remarking, “We must be unanimous; we must hang together,” to which Benjamin Franklin famously retorted, “Yes, we must indeed all hang together, or most certainly we shall all hang separately.”

The signing itself was a private affair and the original autographed document was not publicly displayed. Instead, it was rolled up and unceremoniously toted from place to place with Congress during the Revolutionary war. During the 1790s it was stored in various Philadelphia office buildings. Even after its move in 1800 to the new capital in Washington the Declaration was not a tourist attraction. For most of the nineteenth century it was kept at the State Department and the Patent Office. In the latter location the document was displayed in a single frame with Washington’s military commission, where it suffered severe deterioration through exposure to sunlight and humidity. In 1876, when the Declaration was publicly exhibited in Philadelphia to mark the centennial, its poor condition was cause for alarm. A Philadelphia Times reporter observed, “The text of the document is as clear and distinct as when John Hancock and his copatriots, regardless of the threats of King George and his minions, put their fists to the same.” On the legibility of the signatures, however, the reporter noted, “John Hancock’s name is dim but distinct, but the signatures of Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Morris and others of equal fame have entirely disappeared” (“The Old Declaration” 1). The fading of the Declaration’s signatures, rather than the body of the text, thus prompted the first conservation efforts. Upon returning to Washington, the document was kept in a display cabinet in the State Department library. But, as a dismayed journalist reported in 1892, the document continued to suffer.

[Now not more than ten of the sixty names [sic] are legible to any degree, and these are faded to the last stage of visibility. As to the others, we are told, there are faint traces of writing, but nothing in the form of a signature can be distinguished sufficiently to enable any one to read them. (“Historical Notes” 333)]

In 1894 the Declaration was locked in a State Department safe, where it remained cloistered away until 1924, when it was finally enshrined along with the Constitution in a public exhibit at the Library of Congress. In 1952 the documents were moved
again, this time to a new shrine in the National Archives, where they remain to this
day (Gustafson 271).

The Declaration’s historical status began to ascend between the 1814 Treaty of
Ghent and America’s jubilee anniversary in 1826. One of the earliest indications of its
revival was John Trumbull’s 1818 painting of the Signers. The large canvas,
commissioned by Congress, was displayed in the Capitol rotunda and quickly
became the iconic representation of the Signers. An official engraving of Trumbull’s
work was published in 1822, at which point it became widely available. A letter in
Tefft’s collection, which he received by 1835, relates an unnamed British collector’s
intention to bind a proof-impression of Trumbull’s painting into his volume of
Signers’ autographs (Gilman 383).

In 1818 and 1819 two separate embellished prints of the Declaration were
published. Both featured carefully rendered facsimiles of the 56 signatures as they
appeared on the engrossed Declaration (the text was reproduced in ornamental type
but not facsimile), providing the American public with its first look at the storied
autographs of the Signers. The fidelity of these reproductions—as well as the claim to
priority in conceiving and executing the idea—was vigorously disputed by their
respective publishers (Bidwell 261–64). Attesting to the verisimilitude of the
signatures on Benjamin Own Tyler’s 1818 version, Richard Rush, acting Secretary
of State and son of Signer Benjamin Rush, wrote, “Those executed by Mr. Tyler are
curiously exact imitations, so much so, that it would be difficult, if not impossible,
for the closest scrutiny to distinguish them, were it not for the hand of time, from the
original” (Tyler 17).

Perhaps inspired by the controversy, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams
commissioned the production of an official facsimile of the entire Declaration, which
was completed by engraver William J. Stone in 1823. Two hundred parchment copies
were produced and the plates from Stone’s facsimile provided what would become
the most recognizable reproduction of the Declaration, as it was imagined in its
pristine original state. The 1826 deaths of Jefferson and Adams, two of the last three
living Signers, underscored the need to memorialize a heroic generation on the verge
of extinction. With only Charles Carroll remaining, the eclipse of the Signers was a
source of anxiety. “Carroll is alone. The last relic of a noble band,” the author of an
1831 article lamented. “With what a halo does his loneliness surround him!—‘The
last of the signers!’ He is the link which connects us with the past. When he departs,
the Declaration of Independence will be a monument of the dead” (“Sketches” 350).

The cult of the Signers emerged amid a rising tide of American patriotism, at a
time when imperiled Revolutionary memories were being historicized with a new
sense of urgency. It is not clear when the members of the Continental Congress who
appended their names to the engrossed Declaration became known as the “Signers”.
This is an elementary question, but one that is not easily answered. It is certain,
though, that the Signers existed as an articulated category of national hero by the
second decade of the nineteenth century. Up to this time the Declaration had
occupied an ambiguous place between orality and textuality; its content was received
by many in the form of public readings at commemorative events and, until the
publication of the first facsimile prints, few Americans had ever actually seen the autographs. Drawing attention to the Declaration’s origins in eighteenth-century elocution, Fliegelman suggests that the Declaration’s transformation from rhetorical performance to documentary source—from a text intended to be read aloud to one reproduced for silent contemplation—facilitated its apotheosis as “a primary text in America’s civil religion” (21).

The attention that early collectors lavished on the handwritten autographs of the Signers contributed to this transformation. By focusing on the signatures as a locus of worship and remembrance, early American autograph collectors such as Sprague and Tefft played an important part in constructing the mythology of the Signers as textualizing agents. Since the original Declaration was not accessible to the public and the Signers themselves were in increasingly short supply—Carroll died in 1832—the collection of their signed documents provided an alternative means to engage and memorialize them. “No time could be more appropriate than the present for gathering up such relics of the Founders of the Republic as yet remain to us,” wrote Brotherhead in his 1861 Book of the Signers. “One by one, they themselves have descended to their honored resting-places, and already the tooth of Time has made sad havoc with the very homesteads hallowed by the recollection of their presence” (iv). By 1870, there were 14 complete sets of Signers’ autographs. Many of these and subsequent sets would end up in institutional collections, including the New York Public Library, the Pierpont Morgan Library, the New York State Historical Society, the Library of Congress, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and the University of Pennsylvania (Jenkins 9–10).

**Cult of the Signers: Between Memory and History**

The cult of the Signers was one of the most conspicuous expressions of America’s fascination with autographs during the nineteenth-century. It was also one of the most legitimate. Autograph collecting never achieved the dignified status of book or art collecting, largely owing to the terrible reputation that such collectors earned through the predatory solicitations of many from their ranks. Horace Greeley referred to autograph hunters as the “mosquitoes of literature”, a designation that stuck, and even principled collectors were apparently not above obtaining a desired specimen by ruse if necessary (Robinson 20). As one 1869 defender of autograph collectors wrote:

> Near of kin to the Bibliomaniacs . . . [Autographomaniacs] are rarely allowed to rank with that honorable class. . . . They might be called the Radicals of literary antiquarianism, as their ambition is to drink inspiration from original fountains, from the stream of thought in the channel through which it first flowed from the author’s pen. (“Autographomaniâ” 342)

By the 1850s autograph collecting had become a popular American hobby, but the sale of autographs remained a subsidiary of the book trade until the 1860s, when specialized autograph dealers began to establish themselves. Cappon, a scholar of the autograph trade, notes, “The broad-gauge middle class was on the make, bringing a
kind of democratizing of intellectual pursuits and a broadening of the market for autographs” (25). Middle-class interest no doubt further stigmatized autograph collecting as a plebian hobby. The problem among autograph collectors—particularly those with valuable collections of literary and historical documents—then became one of self-justification. What purpose did the preservation of autographs serve?

Early collectors such as Sprague and Tefft were self-conscious about their pursuits. Tefft, who started his collection in 1815 or 1816, kept it secret because he “felt rather shy of being known as a collector of such things” (Cist 8). Sprague also expressed a degree of shame; in one letter he acknowledged the “mortification to which my autograph mania has subjected me” (Mulder and Stouffer 9) and, writing to Raffles, he remarked, “I am always averse to seeing myself held up to the public gaze as an autograph collector” (September 4, 1846). Sprague turned his self-loathing outward as well. In an 1868 letter to a friend he wrote, “I would advise you to have as little to do with an autograph collector as possible, for though there are some honorable exceptions, yet, as a class, I think they rank A No. 1 in point of meanness” (Joline 39–40). Although Sprague sought to conceal his obsession, in a letter to Raffles, written upon receiving a parcel of autographs, he rhapsodized with surprising openness:

As I opened it and looked at the contents, my wife sat by, amusing herself at my exclamation of rapture. I laugh at my own mania on this subject, but really I cannot get rid of it, and would not if I could. (April 13, 1832)

For “serious” collectors, such as Sprague, Tefft, and others of their stature, the collection of autographs reflected a larger interest in the preservation of history— and, in the case of the Signers, the moment of the nation’s inception. While autograph collectors were primarily concerned with autographed documents—that is, documents and letters with signatures—they participated more generally in the collection of manuscripts, which may or may not have been signed. Moreover, serious collectors privileged the content of signed documents over their autographs alone, a distinction that less sophisticated collectors did not make. Tefft clarified this point in a letter to Eliza Allen, the earliest (and perhaps the only) woman to amass a complete set of Signers: “My collection consists principally of original letters and notes. I do not much value mere signatures where anything else can possibly be obtained” (May 8, 1844). The practice of clipping autographs from complete letters or documents was commonplace and severely criticized. In this way, serious autograph collectors imagined themselves performing a selfless public service by rescuing documents of potential historical importance from obscurity and destruction—even at the hands of ignorant collectors.

Early American autograph collectors were indeed responsible for saving much of the nation’s documentary history from oblivion. But the past they found embodied in the most disparate array of signed documents was neither static nor dead. In fact, it became quite alive in the presence of autographs, even those attached to documents consisting of the most banal content. For autograph collectors and their defenders, such ephemera facilitated a closeness to the past that was vivid and exhilarating. Nathaniel Hawthorne referred to autographs as “magic scrolls”. “Strange,” he mused,
“that the mere identity of paper and ink should be so powerful” (454). The visceral experience of standing in the presence of a document written (and signed) in the hand of a revered individual seems to have been the central motivation for collectors. The charged atmosphere surrounding the autograph is very much like the aura of authenticity that inheres in the original work of art. It is perhaps not surprising that the cult of the Signers—and autograph collecting in general—flourished during the “age of mechanical reproduction”. Unlike the technologies of lithography and photography, which worked “to pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura” in Benjamin’s words (223), the autograph retained the ritual magic of the original.15

It could be argued that the Declaration itself became a national totem for nineteenth-century Americans, and the collection of Signers’ autographs represented an effort to possess a piece of its magic. Durkheim’s totem theory provides a useful framework in which to view the cult of the Signers, and one that helps reconcile the dual tensions of romanticism and realism that shaped its veneration. Durkheim defines the totem as a concrete symbol in which a given society’s moral consciousness is embodied. As such, the totem is the physical manifestation of the social whole. Among the totem’s many special characteristics, he identifies two that are of particular relevance to the cult of the Signers. First, he suggests that any single part of the totem, however small, is equivalent to the whole. “A fragment of a relic has the same virtues as the whole relic. The smallest drop of blood contains the same active principle as all the blood” (174). Thus, for the autograph collector the signature of any one of the 56 Signers may be taken to represent the full power of the original Declaration itself. The collection of “sets” of Signers—all of the Signers’ autographs in one place—might be viewed as an effort to reenact the signing itself, with all in “attendance” as they were in the summer of 1776. Among the cult of the Signers, autographs dated in the year 1776 were especially prized, as they best approximate the nation’s moment of inception. Durkheim also notes the overlap between the totem and the worship of ancestors, so that “the ancestors are fragments of the totem” (190). If the handwritten autographs of the Signers serve as venerated pieces of the Declaration, then it is especially meaningful that such fragments are the self-attesting names of the founding fathers themselves, as they appear on the Declaration. Taking the reconstruction of the totemic Declaration to extraordinary lengths, one nineteenth-century collector went so far as to paste clipped autographs of the 56 Signers onto a full-size engraved facsimile of the original. “It thus faithfully represents the great Declaration and is infinitely more pleasant to look at than the misused and time-wore original at Washington,” Lyman Draper, an authority on autographic collections of the Signers, remarked in 1889 (86).

Durkheim’s totem theory bridges the romantic and realist impulses behind the cult of the Signers by suggesting how the Declaration existed during the nineteenth century as an object of evidence. As Poe wrote:

Next the person of a distinguished man of letters, we desire to see his portrait—next to his portrait, his autograph. In the latter, especially, there is something which seems to bring him before us in his true idiosyncrasy—in his character of scribe. (225)
From the romantic perspective, via the pseudo-science of Lavater, the autograph offered privileged insight into the individuality and true inner being of the heroic Signers. In contrast, the realist perspective placed the individual autograph within a larger set of extrinsic documentary evidence that, taken together, provided the objective truth of the past—as it really was. This latter, more “rational” justification would become the mantra of positivist historians, and it was the one that self-proclaimed serious collectors adopted to distinguish themselves from general collectors. However, what both perspectives share is a desire for authenticity and closeness to the real, whereby the past is not simply revisited or inferred but witnessed in the present, in real time. “Students of history and biography are naturally attracted to the great names that shine in the pages they have read,” wrote Simon Gratz, an eminent Philadelphia collector who donated his set of Signers to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

An autograph letter in the hand of a noted man is the closest personal memorial of him that can be had. Here we have the identical paper that his hands touched and on which he wrote the words we read—words expressing thoughts as they emanated from his brain. (13–15)

The cult of the Signers produced a version of ancestor worship that, while ostensibly historical, was situated in the eternal present of the handwritten signature. If, as Lowenthal (105–23) has suggested, the impulse to erect a pantheon of Revolutionary idols sat uneasily beside the forward-looking iconoclasm of the new nation, the veneration of the Signers offered a propitious site of filial piety. For those among the post-Revolutionary generation who may have regarded the past with ambivalence, the Declaration and its signatures served as a living testament rather than a “monument of the dead”. Indeed, the physical arrangement of these prized collections suggests their function as elaborately staged reconstructions of presence. Following the example of Sprague and Tefft, collectors had their sets housed in custom leather-bound volumes replete with engraved illustrations and supplementary biographical material. Each of the 56 autograph specimens was paired with a portrait of the Signer and, in many cases, an illustration of the Signer’s domicile or a Revolutionary scene animating the individual. In addition, biographical sketches, gleaned from the growing number of published volumes on the subject, were excised and interleaved among the illustrations. By mid-century several biographical volumes included portraits of the Signers with their facsimile signatures—as they appeared on the Declaration—reproduced beneath their likeness. Thus the collector’s autograph specimen might be placed beside the portrait of the Signer and a facsimile of his Declaration signature, conjuring a sense of maximum proximity in the triangulation of autograph, portrait, and replica of the “original” signature. Such supplementary materials swelled the physical dimensions of many collections. One set, compiled by renowned collector Thomas A. Emmet during the 1860s and 1870s, extended to an unprecedented 20 volumes. “Dr. Emmet’s patience and success in bringing together his illustrative material is not merely remarkable,” Draper noted with approval, “but is truly wonderful—greatly excelling any effort of the kind ever attempted” (77).
In its ahistorical desire to keep the founding fathers close at hand, the cult of the Signers continually referred to the Declaration’s original inscriptions as a stable incarnation of authenticity. These fetishized relics—long out of the public eye and known almost exclusively through facsimile—became the pure models against which all specimens, produced before or after the 1776 signing, were compared. The collections of such autographs, supplemented with portraits, hagiographic biographies, and facsimiles of the engrossed Declaration, became sites of memory in which the absent origin was continually reconstituted and commemorated. Describing sites of memory, Nora writes: “[T]he most fundamental purpose of the lieu de mémoire is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial” (19). As surrogates for the living bodies of the Signers, the autographs on the engrossed Declaration became idealized models of American character. Although the shaky signature of Stephen Hopkins—who suffered from “trembling palsy” rather than trepidation—required some reassuring explanation in early biographies of the Signers, the Declaration’s 56 autographs were extolled for their superior legibility. Praising the “many excellent specimens of penmanship” on the Declaration, an 1826 writer concluded, “It is doubtful whether to any state paper in any country, can be found so many well written names” (“Signers” 423). This perceived legibility “from the bold sweep of the pen of John Hancock to the tremulous marks of Stephen Hopkins” was viewed as prima facie evidence of the “firmness and resolution of the Immortal Signers” (“Pickings” 379–80). The wide circulation of facsimile reproductions, many of which presented the Signers’ autographs in isolation and enlarged, seems to have contributed to the Declaration’s recontextualization as a site of iconic individual performances and, perhaps, its consecration as a ground zero of national signification.16

If the post-Revolutionary generation could not match the heroism of their forbears, they could honor them in their individual sacrifice to rescue their living traces. In an essay prefacing the 1867 sale catalog of Tefft’s massive collection, Lewis J. Cist asserted:

No man who has sought—at the cost of much time, labor, and expense, not to speak of the vexation of spirit arising from frequently repeated disappointments in the search after some especially rare name... can fail to be a better patriot—more and more confirmed in his love of country with every fresh accession to his collection of such memorials of her great men. (6)

In assembling such collections, Cist and others argued, the collector inevitably took greater personal interest in the great figures of American history and the preservation of the nation’s heritage, a concern with new relevance in the years following the American Civil War. Among the cult of the Signers, the performance of collecting doubled as the performance of patriotism, an alibi that also aligned collectors with nineteenth-century historians who sought to document the providential origins and progress of the nation. “However insignificant the passion for autograph collecting may appear at the first glance,” one journalist noted in 1858, “it is rapidly increasing among us, and is becoming an indispensable aid to the development of the history of
the past.” Citing the undertakings of Sprague and Tefft specifically, the writer added, “Such men are benefactors of their country, as they preserve from destruction the materials of its history” (“When a Century Ends” 12).

By 1927 there were approximately 26 completed sets in existence, and by 1950 another 10, bringing the total to 36 (Fields, “The Completed Sets” 16–18). An additional four sets were known to exist in 1977 (J. M. Taylor 37) and this revised total does not seem to have changed much to date. By the late nineteenth century it had become prohibitively expensive to assemble such sets. The exceptional rarity of two autographs in particular—those of Thomas Lynch, Jr. and Button Gwinnett—placed a ceiling on the number of sets that could be completed and the number of collectors who could afford to acquire them. Also, many of these rare specimens were effectively taken out of circulation when donated to institutions: 75% of the sets reported in the 1951 count were in the possession of institutions. The author of a 1908 facsimile volume notes:

Year by year the acquirement of a set of autograph letters such as these becomes more difficult. Some of them are now practically unobtainable, and it must be that in short time a complete set of the ‘Signers’ will be an autograph collector’s ‘Ultima Thule’; but be that as it may some of their letters will always be procurable, and the possession of even one will recall more than any words the great dead which brought into being our Country. (Thomas 4)

A complete set has long been beyond the reach of the average collector, but the autographs of the Signers have assumed iconic status in the nation’s collective memory. Writing in 1906, one journalist reflected:

As we study the original document now locked up in the archives in Washington or examine the signature on the excellent reproductions which are fortunately fairly common we seem to be very near the men who, one hundred and thirty years ago, affixed their names to this epoch-making document. (Crawford 804, emphasis added)

Above all, the cult of the Signers underscored the religiosity of the signature as a site of textual transformation, an entire metaphysics of presence revolving around the transubstantiation of body in the handwritten signature.

As the signatures on the original document have faded beyond recognition, the Declaration’s public display is almost irrelevant. The “decisive trait of lieux de mémoire” is, according to Nora, that they “have no referent in reality; or, rather, they are their own referent: pure, exclusively self-referential signs” (23). The washed-out document enshrined in the National Archives is a mere shadow of the original as it exists in the memory of patriotic Americans. While once the original autographs circulated among the public, they are now cloistered away in institutions and inaccessible. Nevertheless, as signatures, the meticulously rendered facsimiles of the original autographs conjure the same embodied presentness and performativity as the relics themselves. The power of the signature, even in replica, is reflected in a recent exhibit at Philadelphia International Airport that features a long translucent wall on which the Signers’ autographs are inscribed. The exhibit’s creator employed
sophisticated digital technology to recreate the signatures because he “felt compelled to make it technically correct... down to the last squiggle of the most obscure signer’s hand” (Strauss 5). Yet for most Americans these idiosyncratic squiggles exist only as figments of the collective imagination. Despite the fact that few have actually seen specimens of the extant originals, their ritual reenactment compels fidelity. The nineteenth-century cult of the Signers salvaged and worshipped the original autographs but, ironically, in doing so unwittingly initiated a process of institutionalization and commodification that eventually removed them from the public, leaving instead the mythology of the Signers and the idea of their signatures as privileged sites of memory.

Notes

[1] According to Webster’s Dictionary, this usage of Hancock’s name emerged as early as 1793.
[2] For further comment on this debate, see Culler (125–28) and Hancher.
[3] Meyer notes that Roman documents relied upon three interdependent components: fides (good faith), sealing, and subscribing. This triad formed a ritualistic “unitary act” whose ceremonial formula, when performed correctly, “irrevocably changed some aspect of the visible or invisible world” (4–5).
[4] McNeil adds that these albums also served as “books of recommendations” for traveling students, demonstrating a way in which signatures might serve as a form of character witness.
[5] For firsthand comment on the disarray of American government documents, see Tocqueville (207–08).
[6] The names of all 56 Signers did not appear on a published version of the Declaration until January 1777, after military victories at Trenton and Princeton seem to have emboldened the Signers to advertise their identities.
[7] It might also be pointed out that the Declaration was never actually sent to its royal addressee. Two of the 24 extant “Dunlap” broadsides—the first printed version of the Declaration, published by John Dunlap on the evening of July 4—reside in British archives, but it is not known when they arrived or whether King George ever saw the document.
[9] The painting’s historical inconsistencies, however, elicited a flurry of commentary. It is interesting to note that Trumbull’s painting depicts Jefferson presenting the Declaration to Hancock, rather than the document’s signing. This action of the painting is often misremembered (see, for example, Kammen 76). Trumbull undertook the design for his painting as early as 1789, and the focus on the Declaration’s presentation perhaps reflects that the document had not yet become famous for its autographs (see Note 10).
[10] Several databases of early American imprints were searched but no references to the “Signers” were found prior to the 1820s. This of course does not rule out its usage at an earlier date, but suggests perhaps that it was not yet widespread.
[11] The first volume of John Sanderson’s monumental Biography of the Signers was published in 1823, and a slew of popular biographical studies celebrating the Signers followed after the death of Carroll, including those of Judson (1839), Dwight (1840), and Goodrich (1841).
Unfortunately, what remains of Sprague and Tefft’s private correspondence sheds dim light on their personal motivations, making it difficult to infer exactly how they imagined the significance of their collections. Two collections of their correspondence, one at Harvard University and one at the University of Delaware, were consulted for this study.

Tefft co-founded the Georgia Historical Society in 1839.

To carry Benjamin’s argument further, he asserts that the work of art’s primitive significance was its “cult value” which, in contrast to the modern artwork’s “exhibition value”, did not require that the original actually be seen. The knowledge of its existence was all that was needed, as reflected in the presence of sacred statues kept in temples restricted to the public. The same principle might be applied to the Declaration, which was hidden from public view until 1924, thus enhancing its “cult value” and providing the conditions for the “cult” of the Signers.

Interestingly, this theoretical proposition is suggested by a most improbable source—Jacques Derrida, who revisited the issue of signatures in a 1976 address concerning the American Declaration. Illustrating the paradoxical extra-legality of the Declaration and its signatures, Derrida notes that the Signers were illegitimate colonial subjects whose right to sign as sovereign Americans was legitimate only retroactively—that is, after the performance of signing the nation into existence, in whose name they sign. “The signature invents the signer,” Derrida observes. “There was no signer, by right, before the event of the Declaration which itself remains the producer and guarantor of its own signature” (‘‘Declarations’’ 10; see also Warner 104–06). The Signers resolved this dilemma, of course, by anchoring their legitimacy in the absolute right of God, “the Supreme Judge of the world” who provides, in Derrida’s words, the “ultimate signature” (‘‘Declarations’’ 12).

Gwinnett was killed in a duel in 1777 and Lynch, a delegate from South Carolina, perished at sea en route to France in 1779. Since both men died young and few complete documents or letters signed by either exist, most complete sets of Signers contain only clipped autographs in their hands. A clipped Gwinnett signature sold for $110,000 at auction in 2001.

References


