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Spring 1975

## From the Collector's Library: Advice for the Novice Collector

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### Recommended Citation

Bannister, Henry S. "From the Collector's Library: Advice for the Novice Collector." The Courier 12.2 (1975): 23-27.

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*Aaron Burr*

From the original portrait by Vanderlyn now in the possession of the New-York Historical Society.

# THE COURIER

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# FROM THE COLLECTOR'S LIBRARY

## *Advice for the Novice Collector*

by Henry S. Bannister  
with a Bibliography compiled by Jacqueline Bartelsman

The book collector often listens to a friend say, "I'd like to collect books," or, "I'm going to start a book collection when I retire." When he is asked, "What will you collect?" there is usually a long pause followed by the surprising admission that such a definite decision has not been made.

Book collecting, it seems, is looked upon as something extraordinary — something about which it is pleasant to dream, but which in reality is quite beyond the realization of all but a few. Visions arise of the great, well known collections at the Pierpont Morgan Library, or the Huntington Library, or of famous university rare book collections. To browse, for instance, along the shelves of the American Antiquarian Society Board Room is an awesome experience in history, for here are books once owned and read by William Bradford and Cotton Mather. Such collections are enough to convince any but the most determined that book collecting is something to admire but, alas, an indulgence too remotely possible to consider seriously.

But this is not true! A little investigation into the customer lists of almost all rare book dealers will reveal that a large number of their accounts are those modest and relatively unknown collectors who derive a deep and satisfying pleasure from the pursuit of this gentle activity.

What do all these unknown collectors collect? The answers are as many-fold as the collectors themselves. Their search is dictated by their personal interests. It is possible to gain as much satisfaction from the acquisition of the various editions, letters, manuscripts and so forth of a relatively little-known author or subject of small interest to anyone other than oneself as from building a collection of rare manuscripts, if that interest is strong and personal. Avenues unsuspected at the outset can open pathways

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undreamed of. The thrill of finding a long sought treasure for one's collection or the disappointment of "just missing" a much desired piece both add to the lure and excitement. Such experiences become a part of the history of each book in the collection. Each is something to recall and share with a kindred spirit.

Collectors should have a genuine interest in building a meaningful collection around a subject. Herein lies satisfaction and a wealth of pleasure. A collector should avoid the temptation to acquire – if that temptation ever arises – in the expectation of an increase in the market value and a consequent substantial profit. This is not *collecting*; this is *speculation*. It transforms a gentle pursuit into something quite different. The excitement that comes from adding each new and long sought book to one's collection becomes transformed into a concern over profits and losses. Yielding to this temptation, the collector sells his soul.

Beginning collectors often consider as first possibilities in their search antique auctions and the attics of old homes. Local auctions may offer old books. While it is possible to find valuable items in such places, the buyer must know what he is bidding for. Too often he comes away with a "find" for which he had paid far more than its real worth.

Book auctions run by professional book firms are not like this. The collector subscribes to the catalogs of such firms and places bids by mail. The items offered by these houses are fully described and authenticated. They are quite unlike the local auction in every respect.

Attics present a different problem. How does one gain the courage to ask for permission to invade someone's home and rummage through his attic? (I confess this prospect has always been beyond the limits of my ability. Nor would I welcome such a request from a stranger knocking at my door.) If a collector is to seek out acquisitions in this manner he needs to have more than a casual knowledge of his subject.

Books, editions, issues all have "points" which separate the desirable from the undesirable. The presence of a perfect capital *J* in *Julius* on line 25 of page 40 of Wescott's *David Harum*, for instance, can mean the difference between a first edition copy that is worth from \$35.00 to \$50.00 and the same edition that is worth \$5.00 because this *J* has a broken foot. Of course, a *David Harum* collector will want the first edition in both states!

There is also the matter of identifying a first edition. If the words *First edition* appear on the verso of the title page there is no question. If, however, the words *First American edition* should appear there, they clearly indicate an earlier edition has been published elsewhere.

Dealers in rare books and used books can be fruitful sources for searching and are well worth consideration. Many of them specialize in areas such as Americana, juvenalia, eighteenth and twentieth century literature, and so on. Some large book houses have departments devoted to these specialized fields. Their personnel are a source of useful information, available for the

asking. They will be delighted to receive inquiries and will be eager to help. Dealers' catalogs are filled with descriptive information that can be found in no other place without research. These catalogs can be like a textbook to the collector, who should read them, study them, and keep them as valuable reference material.

The names and addresses of some book dealers in New York State outside the Metropolitan New York City area can be sent to Library Associates' members upon request. Write to our office at 611 Bird Library, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, 13210.

Following is a list of books to help the novice collector learn something of what he needs to know.

### **Book Collecting: A Selective Bibliography for the Beginner**

When one hears about a famous collection being donated to an institution, a recent purchase by a nearby library, or an exhibition of valuable books, one begins to wonder just what all this is about. How does one become a collector? How does one start? Where does one go? Must one have connections? Is a lot of money necessary? Which subject area does one choose? The following list of books and journal articles is an attempt to answer such questions, to satisfy curiosities, and to set interested people on their way to fulfilling their hopes.

In compiling the bibliography specific guidelines were necessary to serve the needs of our intended users and to select from the vast amount of material in print on book collecting. A time period was defined (1964-1974) to ensure availability of the materials as well as to include the latest developments in the field. Only those sources that deal with book collecting in general and are published in English are listed because the purpose of the bibliography is to serve as a brief introduction and not as a complete guide to all subject areas that exist. Personal reminiscences and book adventures have been kept to a minimum and have only been included because of their helpful hints and encouragement. Most of the items listed are available in the Syracuse University Libraries.

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