



Hands On



History

It's a uniquely personal way of learning—and sharing—history. [By Samuel Hughes](#)

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CANDACE DICARLO

The old friends come to visit, often unexpectedly. They aren't always recognizable at first, and the familiar ones sometimes have to be coaxed into giving up secrets. But if you're patient, and know your history and where to make discreet inquiries, sooner or later you'll get their stories.

Steven Raab C'70 likes to say that he's "friends with dead people." By that measure, he—along with his son Nathan Raab C'00 LPS'08 and daughter-in-law Karen Pearlman Raab C'01—has a pretty large circle of friends, many of them famous. They come, and they go. It's the nature of the rare-documents business.

The letter from Governor Theodore Roosevelt to his friend Henry Sprague, a New York Assemblyman, was typed on *State of New York-Executive Chambers* letterhead and dated January 26, 1900. For Steven, it would prove to be a life-changing document.

I have always been fond of the West African proverb: 'Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far.' If I had not carried the big stick, the organization would not have gotten behind me, and if I had yelled and blustered, as Pankhurst and the similar dishonest lunatics desired, I would not have had ten votes.

It was the first time that Roosevelt used that famous phrase, and it quickly "caught the public's mood and fancy," as Steven would later write. Five months later, the man with the Big Stick would be nominated for vice president.

That letter came to Steven's attention in 1988, when he was still working as a franchise attorney in Philadelphia.

"I saw it in another dealer's catalogue," he recalls, sitting in the Raab Collection offices in Ardmore, Pennsylvania, flanked by Nathan (who came on board in 2004) and Karen (2014). The younger Raabs, who met on a blind date after graduating from Penn, are taking over the family business; Steven and his wife Susan, who helped create it, now spend half their time in Bar Harbor, Maine. But Steven is still the main spokesman in this collective interview, and his slightly ruffled aspect belies a quick mind and exhaustive historical memory. "I recognized that this was the original mailed

copy and not just some subsequent letter saying this phrase," he continues. "So I jumped on it—called that very second, then drove up to Ambler, where the dealer was located."

The letter has since been cited by the Library of Congress as an "American treasure." Steven paid \$4,500 for it, and held on to it for more than a decade. He finally sold it for \$200,000.

"I wasn't even thinking of selling," he says. "But that was the tipping point where I knew, 'I can make money in this field, and lots of it.'"

Not all of the documents are letters. (For the full range, check out raabcollection.com.) In some cases they aren't even documents. A ship's passport from 1793, signed in Philadelphia by President George Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. An audiotape of the radio conversation between the White House and Air Force 1 on the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated. (More on that later.) Or a kind of requisition, such as the July 19, 1802 letter signed by President Thomas Jefferson, ordering the first books for the Library of Congress to be purchased in Paris. As it turns out, the order was penned by Jefferson's secretary—a guy named Meriwether Lewis. The Library of Congress bought it two years ago for \$125,000.

But most of them are epistles of one sort or another, handwritten or typed.

"You obviously need to know what's authentic, and what's not authentic," says Steven. "You shouldn't be in the business if you can't tell. You need to have your pulse on where the market is and what people are interested in, but there's an intangible that comes from knowledge of history and just really appreciating the material—and being able to sense what is truly important."

He gets up and walks over to Exhibit A, a document signed by John Hancock on January 6, 1789. *I hereby certify the said Hon. George Thacher, Esq. to be a representative of this Commonwealth to represent the people thereof in the Congress of the United States.* It appears to be the only surviving credential for the nation's first House of Representatives, and the Raab Collection has it listed at \$75,000.

"Hancock signed a lot of documents as governor of Massachusetts," says Steven. "Nowhere on that document does it mention credentials or first credentials, so you have to be able to look at it and say, 'Holy mackerel! That's a credential from the first Congress!'"

"It's sort of like a sniff test," he explains, citing Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink*. "You take a look at something and you do your research afterwards, but if you've seen enough of these things, there's an initial takeaway—which is, *There's something special here that warrants looking into.* Or, *This is fishy—there's something going on here.* You have to be prepared to throw away a lot of time. Because you see that piece, and you think there may be something in it, but step number two has to be, you take one, two, 10 hours to identify whether it is what you think it might be—and what its actual importance is."

"In a strange way, these people become your colleagues and friends," says Karen, who joined the firm two years ago after serving as director of public-interest and pro-bono programs at Drexel University's law school. (She and Steven both serve as in-house counsel, using their experience to draft contracts and work through whatever legal issues arise.) "You know how they write; you know their voice; you'll know if it's a forged document—because it just won't sound like them. And that comes from a lot of time with the material and getting to know these people."

Steven was a history major at Penn—he cites classes with Edward Peters, Al Rieber, and Alexander Riasanovsky as particularly influential—though he ended up going to law school with an eye toward making a living. But even as he practiced law, he never lost his obsession with history.

"You can't go to school to be a historical-document dealer," points out Karen. "But you do have to be academically interested and inclined to research and write and just appreciate antiquities."

It wasn't until the early 1980s, when he saw checks signed by Thomas Edison for sale at the Franklin Institute, that Steven even realized that "there were such things as autographs that you buy and sell." Something clicked, and in 1985, Susan bought him a check signed by Orville Wright. As he began spending

more time looking at the autographs than doing the law work, he started a small rare-documents business, working out of his basement.

“It really took off,” he says. “I found that I couldn’t be really effective at both, so I went fully into the autograph business in the ’90s.” He and Susan decided to “forget the law, go where our heart took us, and do something that was going to be fun and extraordinary.”

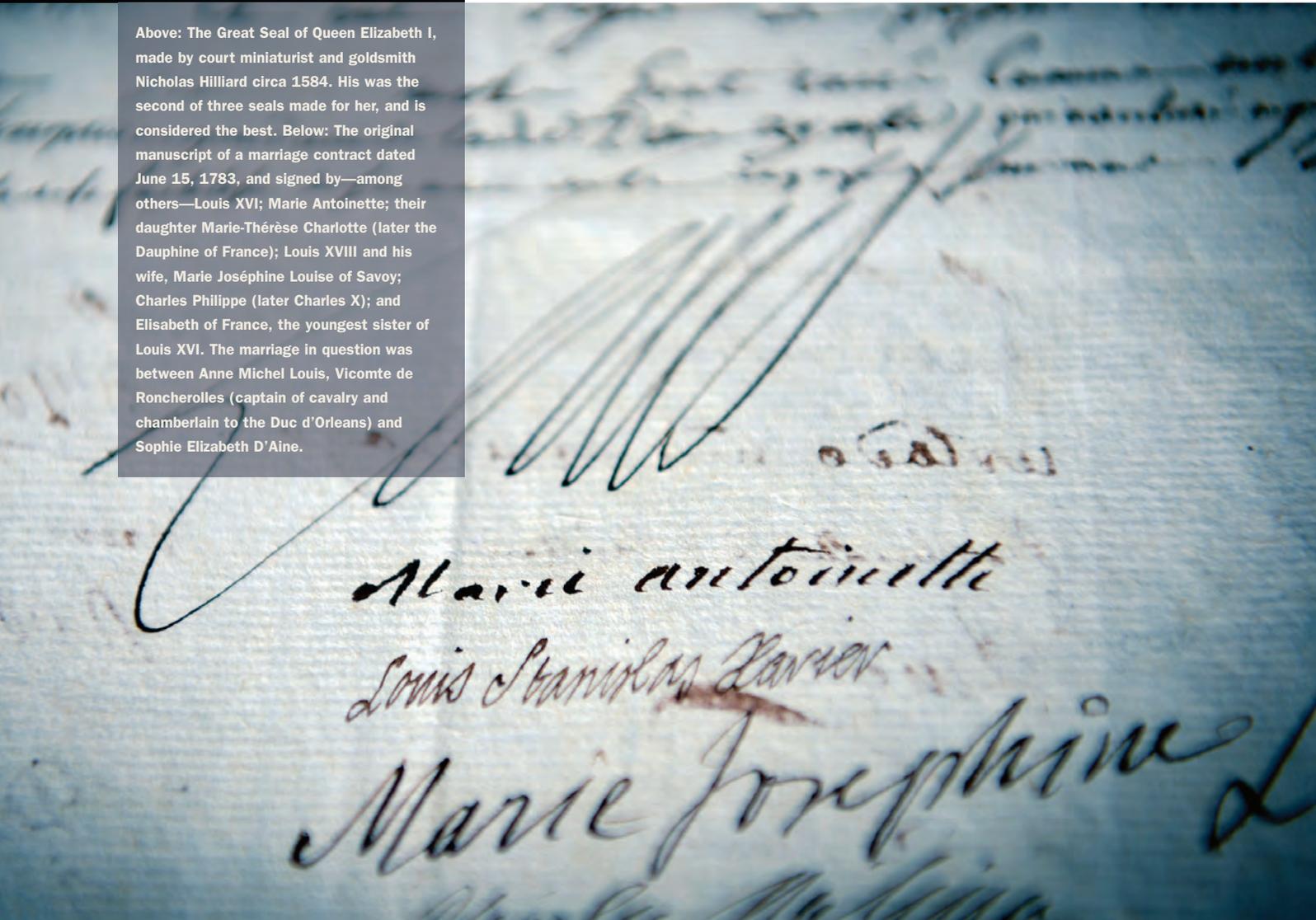
The decision to turn his passion for history into a business was a “confluence of two rivers,” Steven explains. “One, these people held and created and touched these documents. You’re in their shoes, in a small way, for just a moment. Secondly, these documents expose, in letters, how they thought: what their intentions were. What their deeds were. What they were trying to accomplish, for good or ill. So they give you an insight, as primary sources and resources, that you just can’t quite get from reading a biography.”

I would be perfectly willing to assure Mr. Smith that I would not, if elected Governor, set about ‘fighting and breaking down the existing Democratic organization and replacing it with one of my own.’ The last thing I should think of would be building up a machine of my own. So long as the existing Democratic organization was willing to work with thorough heartiness for such policies as would re-establish the reputation of the State and the credit of the Democratic party in serving the State, I should deem myself inexcusable for antagonizing it, so long as I was left absolutely free in the matter of measures and men.

That letter from Woodrow Wilson to John M. Harlan—the son and father of two Supreme Court justices, and Wilson’s old friend from their student days at Princeton University—was written June 23, 1910. Wilson was then serving as Princeton’s president, but he had political ambitions as well. As a reformist and a political outsider, he was a potentially attractive candidate.

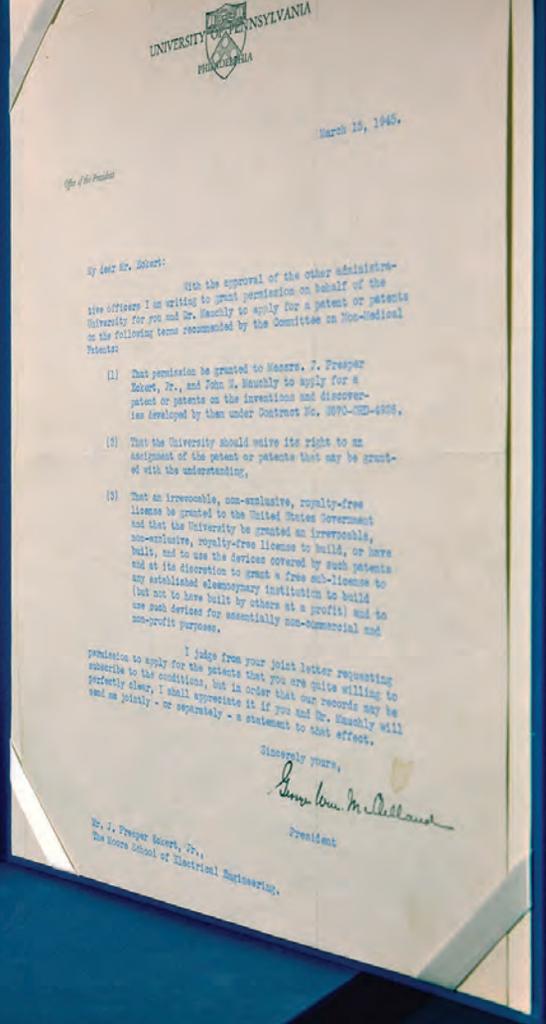
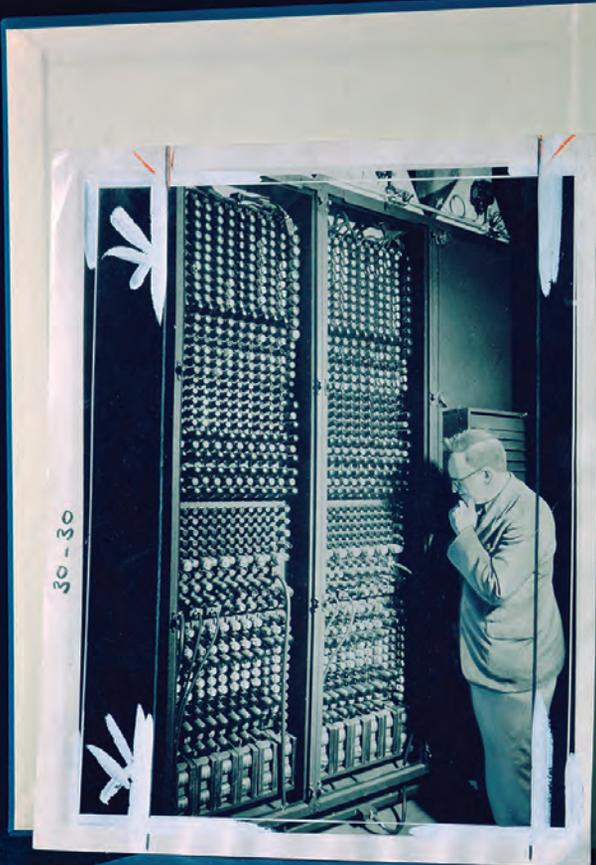


Above: The Great Seal of Queen Elizabeth I, made by court miniaturist and goldsmith Nicholas Hilliard circa 1584. His was the second of three seals made for her, and is considered the best. Below: The original manuscript of a marriage contract dated June 15, 1783, and signed by—among others—Louis XVI; Marie Antoinette; their daughter Marie-Thérèse Charlotte (later the Dauphine of France); Louis XVIII and his wife, Marie Joséphine Louise of Savoy; Charles Philippe (later Charles X); and Elisabeth of France, the youngest sister of Louis XVI. The marriage in question was between Anne Michel Louis, Vicomte de Roncherolles (captain of cavalry and chamberlain to the Duc d’Orleans) and Sophie Elizabeth D’Aine.



...with you, and
...omitted. If
...I shall be glad to
...conduct you.
...honour to be,
Your most obedient
and most humble servant
B. Franklin

On September 13, 1780, Benjamin Franklin, then the United States Commissioner to France, wrote a letter from Passy (the small town near Paris where he had set up his diplomatic office and residence) to James Searle, a Pennsylvania Congressman who had been charged with briefing him. In this letter Franklin refers to the "Letters and Pacquets" Searle had sent informing him and John Adams of the latter's appointment as Commissioner to the Netherlands.



The typewritten letter on the right, dated March 15, 1945, was written by Penn President George McClelland. Addressed to John Mauchly and J. Presper Eckert, both connected with Penn's Moore School of Electrical Engineering, it granted them permission to market the technology that had led to the ENIAC (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer), considered the first modern computer, which they had designed and built at Penn but which had been funded by the US Army.

But while the New Jersey Democratic Party bosses, such as the aforementioned Mr. (Jim) Smith, were intrigued, they were also leery of an academic reformer who might break up the political machine. Harlan, acting as an intermediary, wrote to Wilson and asked if, in the event that he were elected governor, he intended to go about “fighting and breaking down the existing Democratic organization and replacing it with one of his own.” Wilson’s response soothed the fears of the Democratic machine operators—which is why, in Steven Raab’s opinion, it was the most important letter Wilson ever wrote—“because it made him president only two years later.”

Every now and then the Raabs get hold of documents related to their alma mater. The oldest, relating to the College of Philadelphia, was the subject of an Alumni Profile in Sep/Oct 2002. Then there was this, from

an unspecified date in the early to mid-1830s, when John Quincy Adams gave a toast to Philadelphia, expressing his appreciation to an institution that had made him an honorary member:

Gentlemen: I pray you to accept my thanks for the pleasure I have enjoyed in witnessing the celebration, and partaking in the festivities of this day—and for the notice with which you have just honored me; rendered doubly dear to me by the revolutionary lips from which it proceeded, and for the flattering sentiments by which it was accompanied. I will ... content myself with proposing to you for a toast: “The Land of William Penn, and his Great Town, the City of brotherly love.”

Though impossible to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt, Steven makes a strong case that the institution at which he spoke was the University (then on Ninth Street), and that his thanks were for having been

made an honorary member of the Philomathean Society. The “revolutionary lips” were most likely those of William White C1765 G1767 Hon1783, a Penn trustee and the Episcopal bishop of Pennsylvania, whose statue stands in the Quad. He died in July 1836.

A more modern—and substantive—document was a typewritten letter dated March 15, 1945 by Penn President George W. McClelland. In it he gave permission to J. Presper Eckert EE’41 GEE’43 Hon’64 and John Mauchly Hon’60 to sell the technology of ENIAC and market those first electronic, general-purpose computers. A year later the two Penn inventors formed the Eckert-Mauchly Computer Corporation (EMCC), which eventually morphed into the giant corporation known as Unisys.

“There was a lot of flak against [McClelland] for allowing this work, which after all had been done under the auspices of the University, to let it go to a personal, private initiative,” says Steven. “But it had

to hit the private marketplace to have any kind of growth, and that letter made marketing the computer possible.” In a sense, he adds, “that’s really the birth certificate.”

Five years ago, Raab went to an estate sale that offered items belonging to the late General Chester Clifton Jr., who died in 1991. Among them was a box filled with audiotapes and 8 mm films. At the bottom was an old reel-to-reel tape, identified as “Radio Traffic involving AF-1 in flight from Dallas, TX, to Andrews AFB on November 22, 1963.”

Clifton, as Raab knew well, had been a senior aide to President John F. Kennedy. The tape contained extensive conversations between the White House and Air Force 1, but Raab also knew that the LBJ Library in Austin had a copy of another tape of that flight conversation. That one, however, contained only an hour and 40 minutes of the four-hour radio discussions during the flight from Dallas to Washington that awful day.

For Steven, the question immediately was: “Are these the same tapes that everybody else has already? Or, considering that Clifton would’ve had these made that week, might they be different?”

So he bought the box, had the tape digitized and transcribed, then sat down and examined the contents word by word. What he found bordered on explosive: the Clifton tape, at two hours, 22 minutes, contained 42 minutes of material that had been excised from that other, “official” version. If none of it was quite smoking-gun stuff, more than a little was important and intriguing. For decades, conspiracy theorists had wondered about the whereabouts of General Curtis LeMay—the Air Force Chief of Staff whose contempt for Kennedy was common knowledge—that fatal day. On the Clifton tape, a LeMay aide is heard trying to pass a message to the general, who turned out to have been on a plane returning from Toronto. “General LeMay is in a C-140,” the aide says. “He’s inbound. His code name is *Grandson*. And I wanna talk to him. ... If you can’t work him now, it’s gonna be too late, because he’ll be on the ground in a half-hour.”

There was also an abundance of real-time debate about whether Kennedy’s



An unopened bottle of Port originally owned by Maryland Congressman John Hanson, who served as the first president of the Continental Congress, from November 1781 to November 1782. He died in November 1783.

body would be brought to Bethesda Naval Hospital or Walter Reed Hospital for the autopsy and whether First Lady Jackie Kennedy would accompany her husband’s remains, as well as discussions regarding ambulances and limousines to meet the plane.

“It turned out there was a lot of brand new material that had been excised on purpose from the original tape—which, according to the Johnson Library, was somehow lost by mistake,” Raab explains. “So this one is all that’s left.”

That original master tape remains lost to history, and even from the Clifton tape, nearly two hours are missing.

“But this contains much more material than the other,” says Raab. “And I think that Clifton likely would have only edited out things that were extraneous. He had no motivation, unlike others later, to try to doctor the story.”

The Raab Collection donated a copy of the tape to the National Archives—which was both the right thing to do and very good publicity. Not that they needed much help on that front.

“We had a lot of feedback,” says Steven. “It was the number one story in international news for a while—absolutely everywhere. The head of the Kennedy Assassination Commission for Congress in

the 1990s said that this was amazing, great new information. There were people in Congress and in the federal agencies who were incredibly pissed off that some random person looking in the bottom of a box had found something that they had been looking for since 1964.”

When the news broke, Nathan—who began his career with the Associated Press before serving as a press secretary and advisor to several members of Congress—was the point man, interviewed by Piers Morgan, Brian Williams, Wolf Blitzer, and Charlie Rose. The first interview was with Morgan, and he found the experience both fun and somewhat intimidating. “The whole experience aged me 10 years—and taught me a lot,” he says.

For Steven, it was the most emotionally stirring and satisfying find of his life.

“You have to be as old as I am to have that kind of depth of emotion,” he says. “My God—it was beyond anything I could have ever imagined. We found something that provides new information relating to the Kennedy assassination!”

I ask the Raabs if any documents have changed their opinion of an historical event.

“Maybe a different way to look at it is, rather than changing a view of a specific event, you change your view of the person,” suggests Nathan. “You learn how they do things, what kind of personality character they were.” For him and his father, a prime example was Ronald Reagan.

Until Steven spent time with Reagan’s letters to Lorraine Wagner, a secretary with whom he carried on a correspondence for 51 years, his opinion of the actor-turned-politician was not particularly high. But as he read, he came to appreciate the authenticity and decency of the man. “Whether I liked his policies or not, he was a deeply humane, even wonderful person in many ways who was sincere and would have never discriminated against anybody himself,” he says. “So that changed my viewpoint about him and about the actions that followed—I went from feeling very negative to liking him personally and just thinking that maybe some of his ideas had been stretched further than I would like to see them stretched.”

A document from a much earlier president also changed Steven’s opinion, but not for the better.

“Say to them as friends and brothers to listen [to] the voice of their father, & friend. Where [they] now are, they and my white children are too near each other to live in harmony & peace. Their game is destroyed and many of their people will not work & till the earth. Beyond the great river Mississippi, where a part of their nation has gone, their father has provided a [coun]try large enough for them all, and he ad[vises] them to go to it. ...

“Say to my red Choctaw children, and my Chickasaw children to listen. My white children of Mississippi have extended their laws over their country; and if they remain where they now are ... must be subject to those laws. If they will [remove] across the Mississippi, they will be free [from] those laws, and subject only to their own, and the care of their father the President ... Say to the chiefs & warriors that I am their friend, that I wish to act as their friend, but they must, by removing from the limits of the States of Mississippi and Alabama, and by being settled on the lands I offer them, put it in my power to be such.

“... tell them ... that I never speak with a [forked] tongue ... The plan [proposed] is the only one by which [they can be] perpetuated as a nation ... the only one by which they can expect to preserve their own laws, & be benefitted by the care and humane attention of the United States. I am very respectfully your friend, & the friend of my Choctaw and Chickasaw brethren.”

That letter, heavily creased and dated October 15, 1829, was signed, *Andrew Jackson*.

“It was the original letter Andrew Jackson wrote that he sent to Major David Haley to read to all of the Indian tribes on the Trail of Tears march—telling them to get out—or else,” says Karen. (The long-lost letter, whose text was already known, was actually dictated—and signed—by Jackson and written by his nephew, Andrew Jackson Donelson.) “It was in tatters. We had to send it to the conservator to get it pieced back together. I mean, just picture it: The major rides in on his horse. He takes it out of his pocket. He opens it. He holds it. He reads it. He folds it back

up. He puts it back into his pocket. He rides to the next” Indian village.

“I’d always liked Andrew Jackson,” says Steven. “All I had known was the charming letters he’d written. But after I read this letter, I felt differently. Because he didn’t simply suggest the Indians leave—he threatened them. He said, ‘If you don’t get out, and get out now, I can’t be responsible for your safety.’ He had no sympathy for these people as human beings. They were just pawns to be moved around.

“The Indians responded to this, I found out, by saying, ‘We won’t be threatened.’ So he came in with the army and got rid of them all.”

As the younger generation takes over the business, and the market for rare documents evolves, so does the Raab Collection.

“These people are not writing anything else,” says Karen pointedly. “We deal in a product for which the demand increases and the supply constantly decreases, because these things end up in institutions and then the market factors them out. Our customers push us into the more and more important material. So the market for the really high-end material is strong.”

For Steven, the choice was between “living your life in history and being the stewards of these pieces for a little while, or living your life doing something else and keeping the collection. We made the decision fairly early on that we would be content with being their stewards. So when Nathan came on, we sold our personal collection through the business. Now we don’t collect history anymore at the Raab Collection. We simply find the pieces good homes for the future.”

Their clients also see themselves as stewards of history, says Karen. “So you get the documents, and you breathe new life into them, and you pass them along to someone else who’s going to love them.

“Every once in a while, we have a boomerang effect with our own material, and someone will [offer] us something that we sold maybe 20 years ago,” she adds. “Steven will go, ‘Oh my God! Do you remember that piece? I have to have it back!’ And he’ll just love it. It’s like his old friends come back for a visit. And then they’re off again.” ♦