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If You Would Not Be Forgotten . . .

A paper presented to the Sphex Club of Lynchburg
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By James M. Elson

James M. Elson was born in New York City, grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee, and came to Lynchburg in 1984 as executive director of the Academy of Music Theatre, Inc. In 1988 he became executive vice-president of the Patrick Henry Memorial Foundation at Red Hill near Brookneal. Since his retirement in 2000, he has been editor of *Lynch's Ferry*, our local history magazine. In 2004 he published a history of our city titled *Lynchburg, Virginia: The First Two Hundred Years, 1786-1986*.

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If You Would Not Be Forgotten . . .

Let us now praise famous men,
and our fathers in their generations.
The Lord apportioned to them great glory,
his majesty from the beginning.
There were those who ruled their kingdoms,
and were men renowned for their power,
giving counsel by their understanding . . .

The author of this hymn of praise to famous men goes on to mention those who were “leaders of the people in their deliberations and in understanding of learning for the people” . . . They were, he asserts, “honored in their generations and were the glory of their times.” His poem, however, concludes with this cautionary note:

And there are some who have no memorial,
who have perished as though they had not lived;
they have become as though they had not been born,
and so have their children after them.

These words were written in Hebrew, around 200 B. C. and translated into Greek around 130 B. C. as part of “Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus of Sirach.” Ecclesiasticus was eventually incorporated into the Old Testament canon as recognized by Catholics, but not by Protestants or Jews, who refer to them as part of the so-called “Apocrypha.”

I should add for the record the obvious fact that when Ecclesiasticus was written, the concept of “famous women” was hardly widespread and would not be for approximately another two millennia. So please know that the ideas I present are meant to be gender-inclusive.

This paper was prompted by my experiences in writing articles for the past fifteen years for *Lynch's Ferry*, our local history magazine, and editing it for the past six years; and especially by some of the things I learned while writing *Lynchburg, Virginia: The First Two Hundred Years, 1786-1986*, which was published a year ago this month.

My purpose this evening is to encourage you to ask yourselves how you believe you are going to be remembered by posterity. What kind of memorial will you leave after you have departed for, as Shakespeare's Hamlet so nicely put it, “the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns”? By posterity I don't mean just your children or grandchildren, but also your descendants generations hence, as well as present and future members of your community, your profession, and the institutions and organizations in which you served.

“Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers in the generations,” the author of Ecclesiasticus urges us, but also warns us, “And there are some who have no memorial, who have perished as though they had not lived.” All of us here tonight have in some way made our mark—otherwise we would not have been admitted to such a

distinguished group as the Sphex Club. But I will also propose that none of us here is so famous that our memorials to posterity couldn't be helped by some reinforcement and perhaps a little judicious tweaking.

It is here that I will complete the fragment which is the title of this paper:

If you would not be forgotten, as soon as you are dead and rotten,
Either write things worthy reading, or do things worth the writing.

This is well worth repeating, so I will: [Repeat]

This bit of wisdom appeared in *Poor Richard's Almanac* of 1738. "Poor Richard" was of course Benjamin Franklin, who followed both parts of his own advice by not only writing an autobiography but also by doing more than a few things worth the writing. Over the years, of course, many others have been more than happy to record Dr. Franklin's life in far more detail than he did himself.

Benjamin Franklin was not the only one of our nation's founding fathers who was not going to leave to chance what posterity would think of him. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams carefully left thousands of documents and letters. John Adams was generously helped by his equally literate wife Abigail, who by doing so also carved for herself a niche in history achieved by few women of her time.

We don't think of George Washington (who is, in my opinion, our greatest American) as being a literary person, but as W. W. Abbott, the former editor-in-chief of his papers, has written:

None, perhaps not even Jefferson, matched the Father of His Country in his appetite for paperwork. . . . Washington reveals perhaps most clearly, if indirectly, the sense he came to have of the importance that his life held for history, for posterity, in his attitude towards his papers. Writing from Cambridge outside Boston on August 20, 1775 [two months after the Battle of Bunker Hill], he told his cousin Lund Washington, who managed affairs at Mount Vernon for the general during his eight-year absence in the war: "I can hardly think that Lord Dunmore [the colonial governor of Virginia at the time] can act so low, and unmanly a part, as to think of seizing Mrs. Washington by way of revenge upon me; but I desire you will, if there is any sort of reason to suspect a thing of this kind, provide a kitchen for her in Alexandria, or some other place of safety elsewhere for her and my papers."

It would appear that George thought as highly of his papers as he did of Martha, or perhaps it was the other way around.

A check of the web sites for "The Papers of George Washington," "The Papers of Thomas Jefferson," and "The Adams Family Papers" reveals that Washington leads by far with 135,000 documents. Fifty-two out of a projected 90 volumes of them have been published. Thirty-one volumes of Jefferson's papers, estimated at 70,000 in all, are now in print—that's up to 1800 and Jefferson lived until 1826. The papers of the entire Adams

family—John, Abigail, John Quincy, and Henry—apparently number only 27,000 (but that depends on what you consider a paper). Thirty-six volumes of the Adams family papers have been published.

After almost a dozen years as director of the Patrick Henry Memorial at Red Hill, I can tell you from experience that it was extremely difficult to promote the accomplishments of a patriot who, unlike almost all of the other founding fathers, seems to have had a poor sense of history and who left such a sparse documentary trail. Henry was, of course, a charismatic orator. Had there been such a thing as videotape in his day and had it somehow survived for two centuries, we would very likely be seeing and hearing sound bites from his speeches during almost every national holiday and political campaign. But, as one historian has put it, Henry just didn't save much of his mail, nor did he write his memoirs. As a result, his reputation has suffered greatly. His surviving correspondence and those speeches of which we have a record, if gathered together, would probably fill at most only six or seven volumes. As a consequence (although there are other reasons too), Henry does not get the attention from historians he deserves, because if it's one thing historians need, it's documents to pore over—and the more the better.

I think it's safe to say that none of us in this room is going to be as famous as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, or Abigail Adams, with potential biographers eagerly seeking after and plowing through our papers after we are gone. But if you should have a biographer, what would he or she have to look at to tell the story of your life and accomplishments? The chances of our having a full-fledged biography written about us are fairly slim. We do, however, have two biographers—or at least memorialists—in our Sphex Club membership. Jeff Wilson's *"Hello, Friend": Dr. George B. Craddock Stories*, is a compilation of reminiscences about and writings by a senior professional college and beloved friend. Bill Sweeney's seventy-eight-page book *We Remember Charlie* was a tribute to one of his predecessors on the area bench, Judge Charles E. Burks. In 1998 parts of it became an article in *Lynch's Ferry* magazine. Would that we all possessed such qualities as did Dr. Craddock and Judge Burks to inspire such tributes.

If no one is standing by ready to write our biography or at least publish a memorial as Jeff did of Dr. Craddock and Bill of Judge Burks, there is always the option of writing an autobiography for transmitting our life story to posterity. More persons far less famous than Dr. Franklin have found it a useful vehicle, for, as one of the characters in the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Ruddigore*, advises us:

If you wish in the world to advance,
Your merits you're bound to enhance,
You must stir it and stomp it,
And blow your own trumpet,
Or trust me you haven't a chance!

This little jingle is basically sound advice for advancement while you are still in this world and even afterwards, but there are potential drawbacks. The first is that, if not

written with a certain amount of objectivity, an autobiography runs the risk of being looked upon as shameless self-promotion—even in today's society. A second potential drawback to writing an autobiography is that no life is complete until it is over. So although it is doubtless a good idea to start writing your life story now, it is also a good idea to update it periodically, and possibly revise it as you get older and presumably wiser.

A case in point is Benjamin Franklin, who wrote his autobiography when he was in his early fifties—which at the time was approximately ten years longer than the average lifespan for his day. However, Dr. Franklin lived to be eighty-four. During the three decades after writing his autobiography he never updated it—thus leaving out the part of his life that eventually made him an American icon.

In addition, Dr. Franklin's autobiography is written with considerable understatement concerning his not insignificant accomplishments, even at the time he wrote it. But, as the editor of one modern edition has noted:

He was not an introvert nor, for all his engaging little symptoms of vanity, was he ever intoxicated by his own importance. He realized, in the words of Poor Richard, that "he that falls in love with himself will have no rivals." Indeed this is the most modest of the world's great autobiographies. A reader who knew nothing else about Franklin would gain little notion of his real stature in diplomacy, government, and science.

As Dr. Franklin once observed in the pages of *Poor Richard's Almanac*: "There are three things extremely hard—steel, a diamond, and to know thyself." Still, as admirable as we may regard his absence of self-promotion in his autobiography, we should keep in mind that his fame was assured by his accomplishments during the thirty years after he wrote it and the work of his subsequent biographers. Therefore I recommend that you consider the advice of the Gilbert and Sullivan character I mentioned earlier who also counsels:

My boy you may take it from me, that with all the afflictions accused,
With which a man's saddled and hampered and addled
A diffident nature's the worst.

Our life's record for posterity might consist of an autobiography (should we write one), a wide range of additional documents, and a perhaps variety of other items in non-written form. Since it is possible that this record may not be examined, even by members of our immediate family, until after our passing, we would be wise to assemble it in some sort of orderly fashion while we are still alive. Additional documents could be something as common as a birth certificate or a diploma, or perhaps a program of an event in which you appeared, newspaper articles in which you are featured, or a profile about you in a professional journal. Your spouse will probably remember them, but after your death may not know what became of the copies you saved. Perhaps your children never even saw them.

But, you may say, isn't Benjamin Franklin's emphasis on written documents a bit old fashioned? After all, look at all the wonderful technology we have now that didn't exist in his day.

Well yes, let's look at it. Our wonderful twentieth and twenty-first century technology has made it possible that two hundred years from now we may know less about presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, or at least their thoughts on important matters, than we know about the thoughts of presidents George Washington and Thomas Jefferson—even allowing for those expensive, high-tech twenty-first-century presidential libraries.

Of course you could argue that Clinton and Bush aren't as cerebral as Washington and Jefferson, and you would be right. But most of Washington and Jefferson's thoughts were set down on paper before being transmitted, rather than being dispatched in phone calls or e-mails. And even if twentieth- and twenty-first-century electrical transmissions should survive for two centuries in electronic form, which seems doubtful, will the hardware then exist to read or play them?

Most archivists and curators will agree that contemporary electronically produced media of all kinds is far more fragile than the written records of earlier centuries. As I just mentioned, before the twentieth century there was no hardware required to decode messages from software. This talk is not going to become an extended lesson in media conservation, but I will remind you of a few things that most of you already know.

How long any type of media lasts depends on many things—what it's composed of, under what conditions it is stored, and how often and how carefully it is used, to name only three. Many of the old black and white movies dating back a century have been lost due to deterioration of film stock, and the invention of color film created additional conservation problems. Over the years we have seen the fidelity of color television film or videotape of major events deteriorate before our eyes. Many of these will eventually be lost to posterity.

Another problem with film and videotape besides deterioration is that they require appropriate hardware to play them. I will confess to being distrustful of any type of media that relies on some kind of hardware to reproduce its contents. I suppose that makes me a Luddite, but perhaps a well-informed one. So I ask: If the hardware exists now, will it be around in twenty years? In fifty years? Remember 16 millimeter home movies? Remember eight-track tapes? Remember VHS?

You may not be relying on film or videotape but photographs to preserve visual memories of you or your family. Photographs have the advantage of requiring no hardware to present their contents, but be aware of this: The absolute best film to use—if you want your pictures to be around for your children and their children—is black and white. Most color photos fade over time. Polaroid pictures are likely to disappear after ten years, so when you are going to document an important event leave your Polaroid at home. It's very important to save at least your most important negatives. It's a nuisance but they'll allow you to make new prints if the existing ones are destroyed. They will last well if they're kept in acid-free envelopes.

I learned a very important lesson about photographs after the experience of going through hundreds of them in the Jones Memorial Library while searching for illustrations

for my history. To be of any use photographs must be identified and labeled. When you label them, note at the very least what's going on in the picture, who is in it, and where and when it was taken. I found countless photos in the Jones collection with absolutely no indication of who the subjects were. Think of it this way: Would your children be able to recognize unidentified pictures of your parents when they were, say, ten years old? Or even pictures of you, yourself, at the same age?

Another lesson I learned at the Jones Library: Like it or not, your local newspaper is the document of record for most community events and ultimately the reputations of many of our citizens. After a certain number of years, the easiest way—and in some cases the only way—to learn about an individual who is no longer with us is to locate his or her obituary.

And this, I suppose, is as good a place as any to ask you a morbid but ultimately practical question. Has your obituary been written yet? If not, who would you like to write it? I've taken what I regard as the prudent course of action and written my own. After all, who is better qualified?

During research for my Lynchburg history, I found much information in our newspapers that I had encountered nowhere else. Most of Lynchburg's old newspapers are easily accessible on microfilm. That is the good news. The bad news is that having been put on microfilm during the 1950s, the original newspapers up until the end of the nineteenth century were destroyed. Subsequently the masters of the microfilms were lost. Fortunately, the hardware for viewing the microfilms has not, as yet, become obsolete. However, the microfilms themselves—they exist at only four or five locations—are becoming increasingly fragile and will, roll by crumbling roll, no longer be available anywhere. Thus, a major part of our city's historical record will eventually disappear. How will this effect you personally? I suggest you might want to save the newspaper accounts of your accomplishments and copy them on acid-free paper to pass on to your descendants.

This is, I think, as good a place as any to insert a word about acid-free paper and acid-free storage items. Briefly, up until the end of the nineteenth century most books and newspapers were printed on paper with a much higher rag content and a much lower pulp content than paper that came into use toward the beginning of the twentieth century. Paper with a high pulp content has a high acid content, which causes the paper to become yellow and brittle. It is possible, however, to obtain acid free paper, files, folders, and storage boxes for archival purposes. Acid-free album pages are also available for photographs

What else should you save or what should you do to most effectively tell future generations what you want them to know about you? Let's break your posterity down into three categories: (1) your family, (2) your institution or institutions, and (3) your community and perhaps beyond. You might be tempted to turn my question back on me and ask, "Well, what have you done to follow your own advice?" Fair enough.

I can be of most help to you in answering that question at the first, and perhaps most important, family level. One of the first things I did was to go through every picture in the house, *including the ones being displayed in wall frames and on flat surfaces in stand-up frames*, and affix acid-free labels to them with as much information as possible.

Every family picture that was not previously glued to a scrapbook has been labeled and placed in an archival photo album with acid-free sleeves. I have compiled albums of family pictures going back, in some cases, for six generations for each of my three children, plus a general family album, which I will eventually leave to the child who shows an interest in becoming the family archivist.

In a similar fashion, I have compiled a document family file for each of my three children and a fourth, more comprehensive, family file which will eventually go to the family archivist. The files are contained in acid-free folders in acid-free boxes (similar to this one) and include such items as birth, baptismal, marriage, and death certificates, obituaries, genealogical information, newspaper clippings, vitas, certificates documenting accomplishments, and writings by various family members. You might ask whether I've written my autobiography for my family. The answer is "not yet, although I've completed bits and pieces of it." The arrival of a grandchild might provide me the incentive I need to get down to serious work.

I can be of less help in advising you as to how not to be forgotten in the history of the institution where you have earned your living, perhaps for many years. Not too many people will find themselves in the situation I was in during 1994 when, as CEO of the Patrick Henry Memorial Foundation, I was called upon to write and publish a brief history of the organization on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary. The history *did* include information about the foundation's accomplishments during the six years of my tenure. However, I made every effort to give credit to everyone who had contributed to its success, particularly the founders and those who had done much with very little during the Patrick Henry Memorial Foundation's difficult early years. Judging from the response from our supporters, the foundation's history was judged to be accurate and fair.

I will admit that this was an uncommon situation—and our institution was a small one with a fairly short history.. Today, most people find themselves working for larger—much larger—organizations. Even if you are the CEO of one of these, you will probably not have the time, even if you have the inclination, to write its history. Perhaps you can after you retire. One last thought: Even if, for whatever reason, you cannot compose a history of your institution, you might want to consider the possibility of writing one of your department or division within it.

Another possibility for being remembered, is to write a history of an institution with which you have long been connected, but which has not been your workplace—a charitable organization, a church, a lodge, a social group. In five years, the Sphex Club of Lynchburg will observe, and I assume celebrate, one hundred years of its existence. As part of the celebration, will there be a centennial history?

Concerning advice for leaving your personal mark in the annals of Lynchburg, Virginia, I can offer only what I learned while writing my Lynchburg history. Since I had done little "worth the writing" during my twenty years' residence here, composing a history "worthy reading" was, if I were not to be forgotten, my only chance of obeying Dr. Franklin's dictum on the civic level. The thought that in, say, a century or two from now I might be remembered along with Margaret Anthony Cabell, W. Asbury Christian, Rebecca Faulkner Yancey, Ruth Early, Philip Lightfoot Scruggs, and S. Allen Chambers Jr.—all Hill City historians whose books are still consulted—was particularly gratifying.

But that was certainly not the principal reason I spent the equivalent of two full years work on this big fat book. Over my two decades' residence here starting in 1984, I became more and more fascinated with the story of Lynchburg and convinced that it needed a contemporary retelling. One result of my book is that I believe I have given recognition to a number of important Lynchburg events and citizens, particularly in the African American community, not mentioned, or mentioned only in passing, in previous histories. In doing this I hope that I have changed the way present and future generations of Lynchburgers will look at their past.

I would add a cautionary note to anyone who is writing a history of any kind, whether it's personal, organizational, or covers an even wider scope. In his "Postscript" to *The History of Lynchburg, Virginia: 1786-1946* Philip Lightfoot Scruggs wrote "Writing what is technically called 'immediate history' is a mistake. The writer lacks perspective, which comes only through time. Such 'history' is instead commentary on the passing scene."

Wise Mr. Scruggs practiced what he preached by ending his Lynchburg narrative twenty-five years before its publication in 1972. In his *Lynchburg: An Architectural History*, published in 1981, S. Allen Chambers Jr. included only one Hill City building erected after 1940 (the Huston Memorial Chapel at Randolph-Macon Woman's College). I ended my history closer to its time of publication than either Mr. Scruggs or Mr. Chambers, reasoning that Lynchburg's bicentennial would be a good place for an upbeat ending. Thus far, it appears my decision was the correct one.

Another example of having to make a decision about whether something is history or "commentary on the passing scene:" Dr. Bill Quillian is a Sphex Club member who has not only done "things worth the writing" but in my experience, has written at least one thing "worthy reading" (I am sure there are many others I don't know about). Last year he submitted to *Lynch's Ferry* magazine an article titled, "A Page in Lynchburg History: The Lynchburg Newspapers and Racial Strife." It was a retelling of the 1967 battle between the Carter Glass newspapers and a substantial number of our more prominent and progressive citizens, of which Dr. Quillian was one. Although he did not mention himself in his article, in a one-page sidebar titled "A Personal Item," Dr. Quillian discussed his own trials and tribulations as president of Randolph-Macon Woman's College with the Glass newspapers during the 1960s.

Normally *Lynch's Ferry* does not publish personal memoirs of so recent a vintage—even as sidebars. Our editorial board had to decide if Dr. Quillian's story was now history and whether bringing up the thirty-seven-year-old controversy, which at the time, many of you will recall, was quite emotional, would open old wounds. The board decided that the answer to the first question was yes, the controversy was indeed history and to the second that Lynchburg had accepted it as such. With one exception, comments on Dr. Quillian's article were all highly complimentary.

If you have written a personal or family memoir or a history of an organization with which you have been connected, it may—at least for now—be intended for the eyes of family members only or perhaps the confidential files of the organization. Far more often, whether the author publishes his work or not, it is his or her hope that, sooner or later, it will reach the widest audience possible.

If you wish to have your document reach an audience beyond your family and friends, my first suggestion is the Jones Memorial Library. The mission of the Jones Library, as I'm sure most of you know, is "to collect, organize, and make available for public use materials in all formats appropriate for research in genealogy and history, concentrating on the Lynchburg area and the Commonwealth of Virginia." It is the place where I spent most of my time researching my Lynchburg history and, I suspect, where future historians will do the same. People from all over the country come to the Jones Library to research their family's local history and genealogy.

If your history or family genealogy has been published in book form, your donated copy will be cataloged under the appropriate classification and placed on the Jones Library's shelves. If your family or individual narrative and accompanying documents, including genealogical charts, is in pamphlet or manuscript form, it will be placed in the Jones Library's Family Files and given a catalog number which permits easy retrieval. By the way, Wayne Rodes, the Jones Library's director, has informed me that it is *not* a requirement to have been born in Lynchburg or even in Virginia to have your family's historical or genealogical information placed in the library's files.

The Jones Library's Pamphlet File is made up of those smaller printed documents and manuscripts, as well as loose papers that would be difficult to house as part of a larger collection. In the absence of a great number of accompanying records, the history of your organization will be filed under this category. The Pamphlet File's index can locate a particular document by author, title, subject, and, if printed, publisher and date of publication.

Although the Lynchburg Museum System concentrates primarily on collecting three-dimensional artifacts which relate to the history of our city, its files contain numerous documents concerning organizations and individual citizens. Although the Jones Library is the obvious first choice as the archive for your memoir or history, the Lynchburg Museum System is a logical site in which to place a second copy.

Finally, although the Old City Cemetery has been closed to burials in recent years, with the exception of the scatter garden for ashes of the recently deceased and the New Potter's Field for indigent citizen, there will soon be new opportunities for burial in the oldest of Lynchburg's interment sites. As most of you know, a chapel is now being erected at the Old City Cemetery. What you perhaps didn't know is that space in its basement will be devoted to a columbarium and a new burial area. The cemetery's staff will seek to obtain an obituary, a photograph, a funeral program, and other biographical material to add to its archives for each new interment. Although not guaranteed, there is a chance that those interred in the chapel may be mentioned on future Old City Cemetery tours.

So in conclusion, I will assert that Dr. Franklin's advice to "write things worthy reading or do things worth the writing" is as valid today as it was 265 years ago. I suspect the good doctor, scientist that he was, would probably add, "But when you write, make sure you preserve your manuscript on acid-free paper and do everything you can to place copies where those who might be interested will have an opportunity to see them."

I will conclude this paper with a more lyrical ending than the majestic poetry of Ecclesiasticus on one hand or the doggerel of Poor Richard on the other, and with the

Page 10, Elson Sphex Club paper, 13 October 2005

wish that whatever memoir you may leave to posterity will fulfill the hope Shakespeare had for his Sonnet 81 whose

. . . gentle verse,
Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read,
And tongues to be, your being shall rehearse,
When all the breathers of this world are dead,
You still shall live (such virtue hath my pen)
Where breath most breathes, even in the mouth of men.