

Thank You Miss Benjamin

BARRY S. MARTIN

In a small upstate New York town, a twelve-year-old American history buff perused the *Sunday New York Times Book Review* classified advertisements. He noticed:

WALTER R. BENJAMIN
AUTOGRAPHS
18 East 77th Street, New York 21, N.Y
Experts in Original
HISTORICAL MUSICAL LITERARY
LETTERS AND MANUSCRIPTS
Sample Copy of "The Collector"
Sent Free on Request

Little did Barry Martin realize that he was beginning a four-and-half decade friendship with "The Grand Doyenne" of American manuscript collecting. After taking over the firm her father founded in 1887, Mary A. Benjamin became legendary for her encyclopedic knowledge of history and photographic memory of handwriting. Her book, *Autographs: A Key to Collecting* (1946), was the Bible in the field.

From the March 1950 *Collector* "Omnibus" section Barry

ordered signatures of John Quincy Adams (\$3.50), Henry Longfellow (\$2.00) and DeWitt Clinton (\$.50), as well as a Rhode Island Revolutionary War ALS (\$1.00). Miss Benjamin was “sorry” that the last item had been sold, but replaced it with an “even better” one - Colonel Edward Pope’s August 2, 1776 ALS ordering the enlistment of every twenty-fifth man on a “Training Band and Alarm List” for “Service of the United Colonies.”

Miss Benjamin quickly guided her young customer from impulse buying to focused collecting. In the May 1951 *Collector*, she

Cap^t. Benjⁿ. Willcox Sir,

Aug^r. 2^d. 1776 —

You are hereby required to Notice & Warn all who belong to the Training Band & Alarm List within your Limits to meet together on Monday next at such place & time of Day as you shall think most convenient for the purpose of Enlisting every 25th Man in your Company that is now at home for the Service of the United Colonies pursuant to a Resolve of the great & general Court of this Colony; And also on the same day to Enlist every 25th Man for the Service of this Colony pursuant to a Resolve of this Hon^{ble} Council; & if they refuse to Enlist you are hereby required to draught them out, or to take such other Effectual means whereby 25th Men for both of s^d Services may be obtained. And you are further required to make return of what men you shall raise for each Service to me by next Wednesday Evening. I judge it best for you to order your Subj^{ts} to Warn your Company to meet for each one that is duly Warned & does not appear is liable to a fine of Ten pound L. M. pursuant to s^d Resolve.

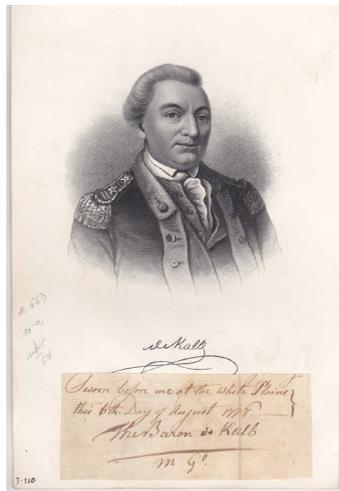
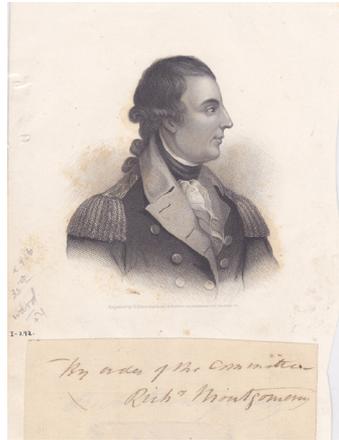
Edw. Pope Coll

Colonel Edward Pope to Captain Benjamin Willcox, August 2, 1776, ALS. From the author’s collection.

reported that Barry had purchased a Nathanael Greene ALS, dated April 16, 1784, for thirty dollars (\$250 in today's money). Barry came up with five dollars. His parents, eager to encourage his new interest, contributed fifteen dollars and loaned him the balance payable at twenty-five cents for forty weeks from a weekly dollar allowance. Miss Benjamin gave him a ten percent discount.

By 1954, the teen-age collector's buying power improved significantly. He was earning a dollar an hour hand-loading and unloading lumber trucks and unloading railroad freight cars. He paid fifty dollars (\$400 in today's money) for a post-Revolutionary War Baron Steuben letter about his not-so-good personal finances. The same year Barry paid thirty-five dollars each for two, in Miss Benjamin's words, "very scarce" items – dated salutations and signatures mounted on engravings of Brigadier General Richard Montgomery, who was killed in the American New Year's Eve 1775 attack on Quebec, Canada, and of Baron de Kalb, who died heroically from wounds suffered at the Battle of Camden in August 1780. Miss Benjamin said one of her "biggest collectors" had ordered the de Kalb item too late.

Half a century later Barry saw an auction catalog listing a letter from Battle of Cowpens hero Colonel John Eager Howard to the Army Paymaster- General about General de Kalb's expenditure of "useless" Continental currency while leading the Southern Army. Barry "had to have"



this letter, which Miss Benjamin had sold in 1958 for twenty-five dollars, and was the winning bidder at \$869.50.

For Barry's 1955 high school graduation present his parents purchased a pass signed by Hessian Colonel Rall, who was killed in the Battle of Trenton. Miss Benjamin commented: "Frightfully scarce. Never listed or had him in 30 years!" This acquisition nicely complimented a Lieutenant Benjamin Bourn December 31, 1776 ALS describing Washington's crossing of the Delaware River.

One of Barry's College of William and Mary American history professors, William W. Abbot, later chief editor of the *Papers of George Washington*, introduced Barry to Don Higginbotham. Barry had responded to a *New York Times Book Review* classified ad and sent Higginbotham a transcription of his Daniel Morgan June 27, 1794 ALS to Isaac Zane. The young collector became a "footnote to history" in Higginbotham's *Daniel Morgan: Revolutionary Rifleman*.

Then came marriage, law school, military duty, earning a living, two children, a mortgage, college tuition and giving up acquiring, but not enjoying, historical manuscripts. A reading of Colonel Pope's letter calling up the Rhode Island militia was the highlight of a July 4, 1976 neighborhood party. Miss Benjamin wrote Barry that "the Bicentennial boom has sent material on the American Revolution very high indeed."

In the Christmas 1988 *Collector* article entitled "The Encouragement of Young and New Collectors" Miss Benjamin quoted the May 1951 item about Barry and encouraged her readers to give children an autograph "to try and encourage him or her to know more of the history of his own and other countries."

During one of too few visits to Miss Benjamin's New York City office, Barry met her husband, Columbia University Professor Harold G. Henderson, who had served on General Douglas MacArthur's staff and written Emperor Hirohito's speech renouncing his divinity. Professor Henderson's field, Far Eastern Studies, seemed out of this world to the upstate youngster.

Lo and behold, in 1988, Barry and his wife Carolyn won a trip to China that stimulated a new historical interest for him. After twenty years of research, Barry S. Martin proudly published *Forgotten Aviator: The Adventures of Royal Leonard* about an American pilot for a Manchurian warlord who kidnapped Chinese Dicta-

tor Chiang Kai-shek, provided Communist political commissar Chou En-lai his first plane ride, and was selected by Claire Chenault to command a projected Flying Tigers bomber wing.

In July 2002, Barry participated in a program commemorating the two hundredth anniversary of Daniel Morgan's death. A Morgan's Riflemen Reenactor crept behind Barry and whispered "that letter belongs here." Barry presented his favorite ALS to the Winchester-Frederick County Historical Society at Morgan's home "Saratoga." The *Winchester (VA) Star* headline read "Morgan Letter, 200 Years Old, Returns Home."

Barry has also presented nicely framed portraits and documents of Benjamin Harrison and Carter Braxton, Signers of the Declaration of Independence who attended William & Mary, to his Alma Mater's History Department in honor of friends and classmates who were outstanding student leaders.

Six decades and counting the not-so-young collector is still seeking that A.D.S. or D.S. of a Revolutionary War officer or Signer of the Declaration of Independence that fits his Golden Senior allowance. He is following Daniel Morgan's advice to his friend Zane "to take care and Manage the last stake, with care and prudence – the last stake is worth all the others." For their personal pleasure Barry and Carolyn are working on a pictorial book telling the Story of the American Revolution through his manuscript collection. Miss Benjamin, who died in 1998 at age 93, would approve.

NOTES

Barry S. Martin is ...

Please email an author's note to me. Thanks