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# Serving through Transcribing: Preserving History while Building Community

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**Abstract:** Community is a foundational element in honors education. During the global pandemic, students reimaged ways to connect in order to build community and serve one another. Authors describe a virtual collaboration in transcription, where honors students gathered to participate in digital transcribe-a-thons. These informal groupings evolved into a transcribing club that met three times a week (collectively logging more than 1,600 hours) and transcribed over 16,000 historical documents. A study of participating transcribers reveals enhanced historical knowledge, skill building, and opportunities for relationships with students of varying interests and backgrounds despite edicts for social distancing. While a common feature of the club is a connection to something beyond the student, authors maintain that the experience of transcribing also brings a sense of connectedness with fellow honors students and the honors college. Authors provide student insight and outcomes as well as detailed instructions for honors practitioners seeking to introduce historical transcription to their students.

**Keywords:** transcription; virtual volunteerism; COVID-19 pandemic—teaching and learning; service learning; Youngstown State University (OH)–Sokolov Honors College

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The mission of the Youngstown State University (YSU) Sokolov Honors College is to inspire a love of learning through opportunity, community, and family. The college fulfills that mission in part by instilling the value of service in students who volunteer sixty hours each year. NCHC places importance on service-learning with a major emphasis on community engagement (Definition of Honors Education, 2013). Existing research points to successful

outcomes incorporating service-learning into an honors composition classroom, an international service-learning honors geography course, and an interdisciplinary service-learning honors course (Parker, 2007; Powell, 2008; Vender, 2004). During the pandemic, students in the Sokolov Honors College embraced virtual volunteerism outside of the classroom by creating opportunities to serve and build community through a storytelling program, tutoring, and transcribing historical documents.

The students who formed the transcribing club collectively transcribed nearly 16,000 documents and logged more than 1,600 hours of service in its first year and a half. The transcribing process digitizes documents in a manner that improves access to knowledge for future researchers and all who seek such information. Once transcribed, documents remain accessible through open-access repositories such as the Library of Congress and Smithsonian Institute in perpetuity.

Even as activities return to in-person, the transcribing club continues to find value in being able to connect virtually and serve. What follows is an in-depth examination of the transcribing club formation and function. This manuscript in conjunction with the transcribing club manual (available at <http://hdl.handle.net/1989/16794>) could be used to establish, on any budget, a volunteer program centered around transcribing. We also explore the student experience participating in such a program, including knowledge and skills gained and other benefits derived.

## **FORMING THE CLUB: JULIE'S TRANSCRIBING STORY**

As a busy student with an immunocompromised family member, I wanted to continue volunteering during my first year of college despite my pandemic limitations. My goal was to find a virtual volunteer experience that would benefit the community while protecting my family from the virus.

During the summer of 2020, I discovered the Smithsonian and Library of Congress Transcription Centers. These online websites offer students the opportunity to transcribe historical, scientific, and political documents that historians and researchers can use in the future. These sites express the need for volunteers to transcribe or correct millions of hard-to-read historical and scientific documents. Transcribers can browse projects across various categories to locate documents that align with their own interests or areas in which they seek to gain knowledge.

Throughout the fall 2020 semester, I conducted transcribing meetings on the Webex video conferencing platform, which allowed honors students to transcribe documents while conversing in a virtual environment. We also held a large transcribe-a-thon event where 51 students transcribed more than 200 documents. Weekly meetings followed and later evolved into a transcribing club, where students meet three days a week to volunteer by transcribing historical documents and building community with each other. The student-led club is supported by Mollie Hartup, honors faculty/staff member and co-author of this article. Students have transcribed items, including what Teddy Roosevelt called his “Great Mass of Papers” (Library of Congress). We have transcribed letters from Roosevelt’s family members, global political figures, military records, and other historical documents. We have also transcribed scientific documents from Annie Jump Cannon, a female scientist who measured the temperature and location of stars in 1914. See the Appendix for six examples of transcribed documents along with their web addresses.

Eventually, I formalized this work on my transcript by completing an honors independent study under the guidance of Hartup. The one-hour course included three required components: a project deliverable, a reflection, and a presentation. For my project, I wrote a manual that describes the details of managing the transcribing club. This manual consists of a transcription tutorial of the Smithsonian and Library of Congress Transcription Centers and my Transcription Quick Guide. This guide also includes the details of planning and conducting a meeting. At the end of the semester, I wrote a paper regarding the growth of the once-a-week sessions to the thrice-weekly meetings of the transcribing club. This opportunity allowed me to reflect on my personal leadership growth in teaching members to follow proper transcription techniques, making adjustments when necessary, and making new friends in a virtual environment. I also presented the project at the NCHC conference in Orlando, Florida, in October 2021.

This club provided the perfect platform for me to volunteer and virtually build community among honors students while quarantined at home. Club members worldwide have the opportunity to interact with students of different majors. We discuss our classwork, hobbies, families, and pets. For example, several music majors virtually performed complex orchestral scores prior to a virtual competition. A business major living in India started his morning at 4:30am to attend our meetings halfway across the globe. The upper-class students mentored first-year students with similar majors. I learned more about my peers than I could have without this club.

## TRAINING STUDENT TRANSCRIBERS

The transcribing club's mission is to transcribe or correct millions of hard-to-read historical and scientific documents. Club members find letters, scientific experiments, and political papers that correlate to events occurring today, such as the pandemic of 1918. Students have the freedom to browse the transcription center and select their own documents to transcribe. They can also collaborate on a document with one student transcribing and a second student reviewing the work.

Each two-hour transcribing club meeting follows the same structure and takes place via Webex. During the first five minutes, the student host greets the attendees and presents a tutorial of transcription. Next, the host demonstrates logging on to the transcription website and transcribing a sample document. When presenting the website, the host reminds students of transcription best practices. For example, transcribers must type the words exactly how they are written on the page, even if misspelled. The host strives to understand the transcription abilities and encourage the learning of each student, whether a beginner or a skilled transcriber.

After the transcription tutorial, the host allows attendees to ask any questions they may have before individual transcribing begins. The host also keeps a tally of the number of pages transcribed or reviewed. Students transcribe for thirty minutes to an hour and then return to the Webex application to participate in group activities and icebreakers. Students can discuss the icebreaker questions via the chat option or turn on their microphone to talk. Icebreaker activities allow students to learn more about each other in a virtual environment.

After the icebreaker activity, students transcribe for the remainder of the meeting, reserving ten minutes at the end to submit the number of pages that they transcribed or reviewed. Students share what they learned about content or process during that session. The host thanks students for attending and reminds them of future meetings. The host also reminds students how to log their two hours of volunteer service in the honors student dashboard.

At the end of each session, the host compiles the total number of pages transcribed and reviewed along with the name of each student who attended the meeting. Then, the host enters this data into an Excel sheet that tracks the total number of pages the club has transcribed. The log is also used in rewarding members for attendance and motivating members to return. By attending multiple meetings, students can earn distinctions and prizes, which were

donated by the Centofanti Family. Transcribers can also include any earned distinctions on a résumé. For example, after one meeting, a student becomes a member and earns a transcribing club pin, and after five meetings, a student becomes a transcriber and earns a pen. Additional small prizes are offered as an incentive to continue with the club as milestones are attained.

## **HONORS AS SOURCE OF COMMUNITY**

Fostering community within honors while serving the community at large is deeply ingrained in the YSU Honors College. Anecdotal evidence suggested that transcribing club involvement might enhance the student experience by enabling personal connections through virtual service and perhaps increase a sense of belonging for students, which Strayhorn (2019) defines as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers” (p. 4). A stronger sense of belonging may benefit students by also signaling deeper engagement with studies, persistence, and success (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). Honors is uniquely positioned to build community while benefiting the collective, beginning with honors students’ taking on a lead role in discussions and other activity in the classroom (Bell, 2008; Houry, 2016). Bell specifically urges that inclusive honors experiences exist throughout the university, open to both honors and non-honors students alike.

## **STUDY DESIGN**

To gain a better understanding of the student transcribing experience, we developed a study and obtained IRB approval (Protocol 2021-126) from Youngstown State University. Using a criterion sampling method, we distributed a survey to all students who have transcribed. Of the 112 individuals invited to participate, 20 completed the survey. Of the respondents, 9 were entering their second year, 5 entering their third year, and 6 entering their fourth year. Nine had attended 10 or more transcribing sessions; 11 had attended 6 or fewer at the time of completion. The mixed methods survey was designed to gain an understanding of the impact of transcribing on the students. Open-ended questions were included for students to share more about what they learned from transcribing and how the experience impacted their sense of belonging.

## FINDINGS

Students completing the survey reported that the transcribing club aided them in learning various skills and building relationships.

- 12 students indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that the transcribing club has helped them make new friends; 6 were neutral on the subject; 1 disagreed; and 1 did not answer the question.
- 16 students indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that the transcribing club has allowed them to learn new things; 3 were neutral; and 1 did not answer the question.
- 15 students indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that the transcribing club has made them feel more connected to the YSU community; 3 were neutral; 1 disagreed; and 1 did not answer the question.
- 17 students indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that the transcribing club has made them feel more connected to the honors college community; 2 were neutral; and 1 did not answer the question.

Students reported learning historical information, communication skills, and how to read cursive, since many had not been formally taught in elementary school. When asked to describe the most important thing they learned from transcribing in an open-ended manner, 8 participants cited learning about historical events and/or preserving history, and 6 participants listed various skills, which included reading fonts, handwriting, and translations from different languages; typing speed; teamwork; and the importance of taking one's time and being thorough. Students also indicated that skills gained now will benefit them in the future.

I liked getting a glimpse into presidents' everyday lives through their journals. It was so cool to see how they came to make big decisions, and just how their lives were outside of their work.

\* \* \*

Transcribing has taught me numerous skills: how to read a variety of fonts/hand-writing styles, how to translate different words from different languages, how to format a variety of letter and article columns, and more. This is important to me as a future educator who will need to read a variety of documents and student work in order to properly evaluate my pupils.

\* \* \*

Transcribing has taught me to take my time with what I'm working on and to make sure I'm doing a thorough job. In recent years I have just focused on getting things done quickly without putting as much effort as I could into my work. Learning how to take my time and be diligent is important because it will help me with things I do every-day as well as helping me as I progress through college.

The experience of transcribing also helped students feel more connected to fellow honors students and the honors college. Six participants offered insights into how transcribing enhanced their sense of belonging. A common thread between all the responses was a sense of connection to something beyond themselves as individuals.

The transcribing club has made me feel like I am a part of something at YSU. I was nervous about joining clubs this past year due to COVID, but the transcribing club provided me with a safe, virtual opportunity to get involved at YSU.

\* \* \*

It has helped me become more involved with other students at YSU. My previous volunteer work was mostly individual. Transcribing has opened up a new door when it comes to volunteering. Along with being involved with people, I finally feel like part of a group and I enjoy being surrounded by people who care about things that I do.

\* \* \*

I've been able to connect with students of all ages and backgrounds through our Webex meetings, and I'm confident that no other volunteerism opportunity or event would've allowed me to cross paths with many of these individuals.

Two participants mentioned that transcribing offered a safe alternative to in-person service and made them feel more comfortable during the pandemic. Students also liked the idea of transcribing as a way to indirectly benefit more people.

Most in-person volunteerism helps a small amount of people such as teams at local food banks or rescue shelters; however, when we transcribe these documents, we are volunteering on a much grander, almost global scale. We are blessed with the opportunity to transcribe these important documents to make them more accessible to the public through the internet.

\* \* \*

Serving the community means looking past the scope of yourself. And transcribing is so unique in that you are able to serve for not just your local community, but also a larger one.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Since we used a criterion sampling method, we surveyed all 112 students who have transcribed at least once, including one of the large transcribe-a-thons to which the entire college was invited. The 20 respondents represent 17.8% of the total population. We suspect that those who answered the survey are those students who are regular members or who have attended multiple transcribing sessions. However, to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of the highly involved student, a future study could incorporate a focus group or interviews of those who regularly transcribe.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

In the future, we hope to expand the transcribing club by scanning, digitizing, and transcribing historical documents from Youngstown and surrounding communities. This project will allow students to learn more about the community where they attend college while building friendships among honors college students. This new direction provides additional opportunities for active student involvement. First, students can scan historical documents and upload them to a Google Drive. Next, students can transcribe these documents and upload a PDF copy to the YSU Maag Library's Digital Repository. This additional aspect of the transcribing club will allow students of different majors to transcribe documents directly related to their discipline. Students of all backgrounds can share their culture and family history, thus enhancing the diversity of the online transcription community. Honors college students can transcribe documents and memorabilia from alumni in anticipation of the upcoming 30th year of the YSU Honors College, which will allow students to connect with the history of the college. The transcribing club is also currently exploring partnering with the history club on campus, which presents an opportunity to draw in non-honors students who can also benefit from the experience.

An upcoming transcribe-a-thon is being planned in conjunction with another university's honors college. Additional opportunities for collaboration are welcome if any readers wish to explore a future joint event.

A recent Sokolov honors graduate identified being involved in the transcribing club as the most memorable component of the honors experience. Given that research suggests engaging in service-learning improves student retention outcomes, it may be worth examining the role the transcribing club plays in retaining students (Pelco, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

The present study explores the experience of students serving through transcribing and suggests that they not only benefited by learning various skills and historical knowledge but also gained an enhanced sense of belonging. Students reported feeling more connected to one another as a result of transcribing and valued the feeling that their efforts were contributing to the larger community and that together they could make a greater impact than by serving alone.

Honors faculty support the transcribing club efforts not only in its operations but also by referring honors students who are seeking service opportunities to join the group. The student-reported outcomes provide strong evidence that transcribing is a meaningful opportunity to serve. Students who have consistently transcribed have also taken on more leadership roles within the group, serving as team leaders for large transcribe-a-thon events. Faculty have continually been impressed with the student development that occurs within the transcribing club.

Transcribing has positively impacted the lives of students involved. For some, transcribing represented a safe alternative to in-person service during the pandemic. For others, it was a way to make new friends when opportunities for in-person gatherings were limited. Even as classes have returned to in-person, the transcribing club continues to meet virtually given the convenience of being able to serve together from anywhere. Future gatherings may transition to hybrid or in-person. A quotation from Teddy Roosevelt, discovered by a student while transcribing, has served as an unofficial motto for the transcribing club: “Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”

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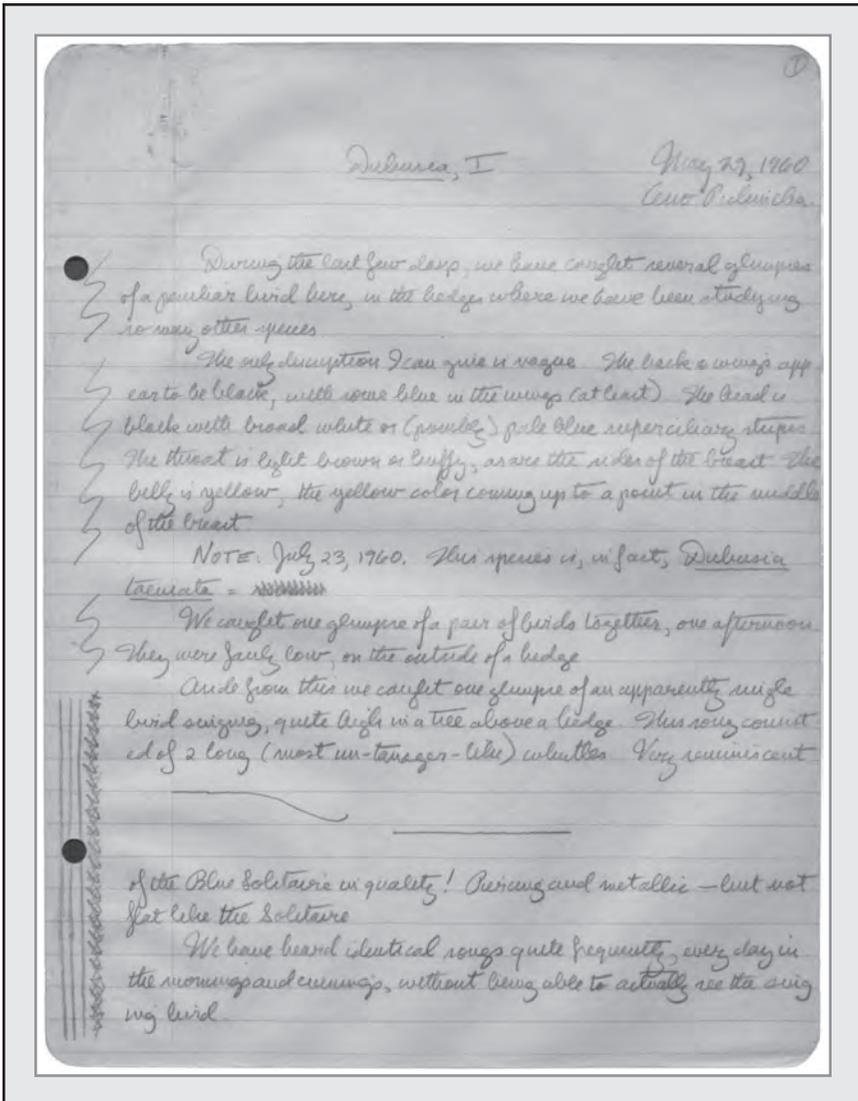
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## APPENDIX

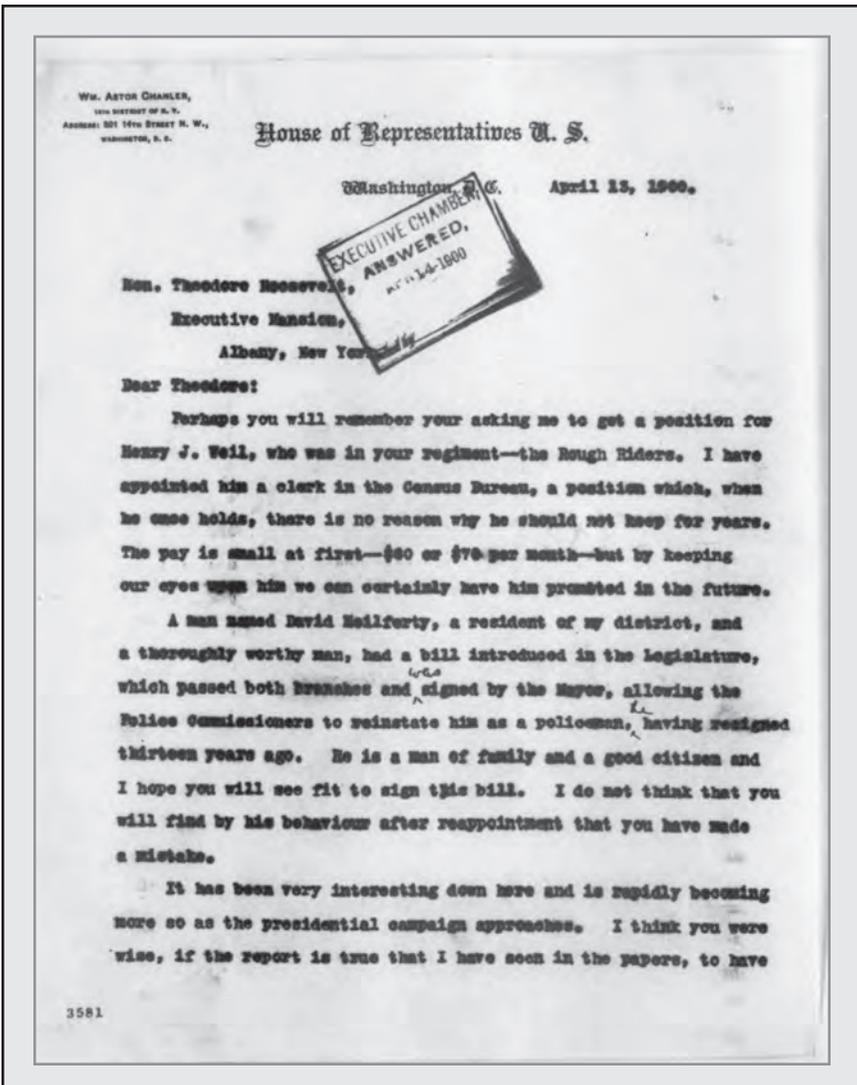
## Transcription Examples and Web Addresses



Martin H. Moynihan researched bird species in Panama and Peru during the 1960s. This document includes descriptions of a few birds that he discovered on the island. His project, "Miscellaneous Bird Species in Panama and Peru," is found on the Smithsonian Transcription Center.

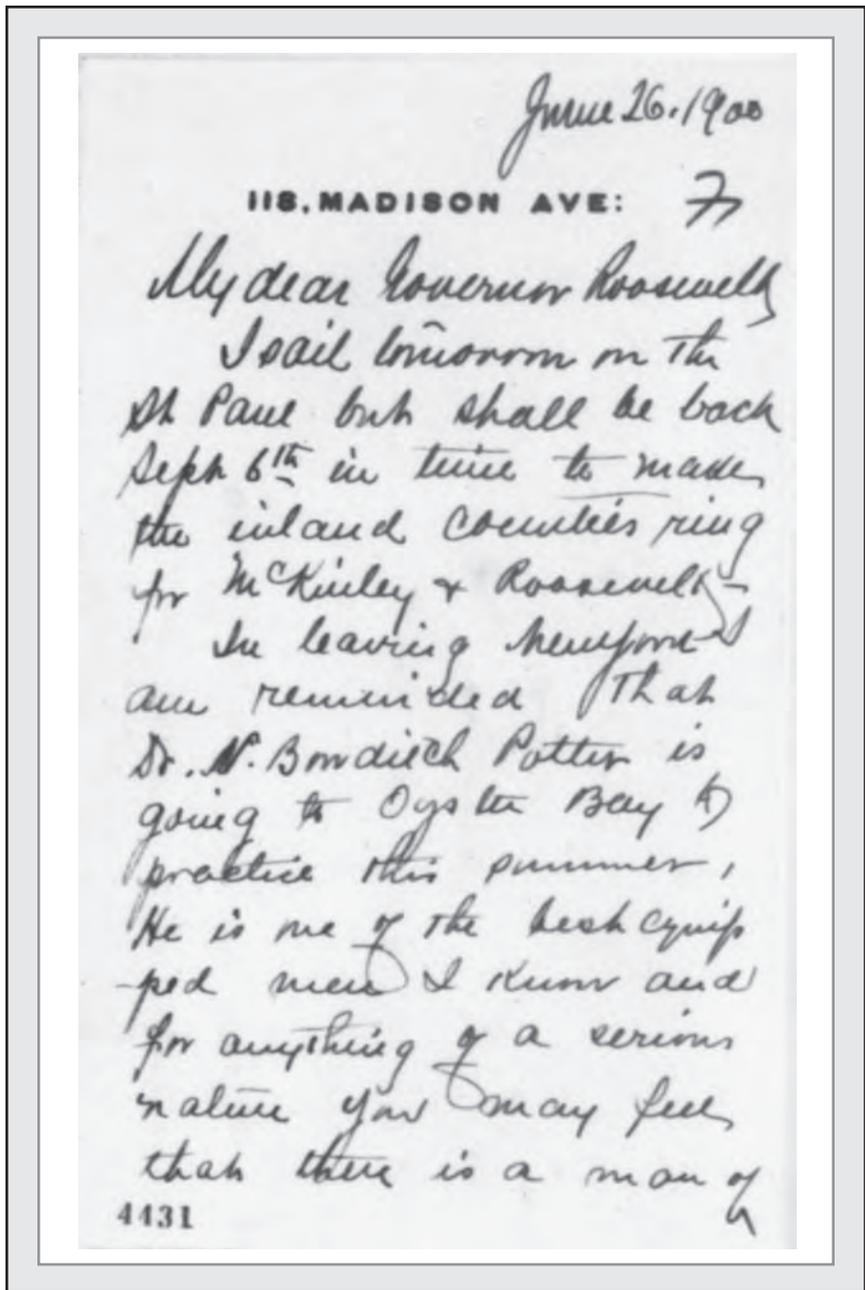
Source: <<https://transcription.si.edu/transcribe/26092/SIA-SIA2017-002410>>





Theodore Roosevelt was the 26th President of the United States and the Governor of New York, as well as a soldier, conservationist, and historian. Roosevelt's documents range from classified government information to personal family letters. This document is a discussion of one of Roosevelt's former soldiers attempting to earn a position in the government.

Source: <<https://crowd.loc.gov/campaigns/rough-rider-bull-moose-theodore-roosevelt/1-aug-1759-mar-6-1901-rough-rider-to-vice-president/mss382990005/mss382990005-4>>



This document is from one of Roosevelt's friends informing him of his travels. The Theodore Roosevelt Project is found on the Library of Congress Transcription Center.

Source: <<https://crowd.loc.gov/campaigns/rough-rider-bull-moose-theodore-roosevelt/1-aug-1759-mar-6-1901-rough-rider-to-vice-president/mss382990005/mss382990005-906>>

# analysis

FRANK CHODOROV, EDITOR

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Nothing is unchangeable but the inherent evil, inoperability, of man.—Thomas Jefferson

JANUARY 1945

## Mr. Beveridge Hits the Spot

DETAILS of his formula for a good society are released by inventor Sir William Beveridge in a supplementary plan to be published in this country soon. All but one of these details, as given in a recent review of his new book, can be set aside as secondary; the one of primary importance is what Sir William calls "the socialization of demand." Its importance amounts to this: every political scheme to better the economy of man must contemplate the socialization of demand.

What is meant by socializing demand is that the State underwrite consumption. The national budget will include in addition to public revenue and expenditures, the estimated income and outlay of all the citizens. The spending of this total budget into "full employment" would be the function of the State. What and how much the people may consume will be pre-determined by the State on the basis of this gross national income.

It would be well to consider the significance of this proposal to substitute planned consumption for free choice. In Great Britain it is getting strong support, and the way things are going in the "land of the free" the odds are that it will not be passed up here. During the next depression, within a decade after the close of hostilities, we can expect it to be cooked up into law and fed to our 20,000,000 unemployed. Now is the time to look into this thing.

What is "demand" and whence does it arise? When you demand a steak of the butcher you offer to trade your wealth for his. You do so because you have a desire for steak, a desire that is keener than your desire for the money you tender in exchange. That is the point we must keep in mind, that desire precedes demand. You desire the steak because you are hungry. The hunger could be assuaged by a mess of spaghetti, or maybe some dehydrated vegetables or a pill containing all the vitamins and calories and whatnot necessary to keep you from starving. Notwithstanding these alternatives, the idea of a juicy steak has somehow gotten into your mind. That idea expresses itself in a desire which by an exercise of will is transformed into demand. The germ of demand, then, is an idea.

Whatever the essence of life is, its running course is the

couple of million years one does by means of an aeroplane, it all came from a thought which, though others may have hit upon it at the same time, originated in a single brain. It wasn't socialized; an idea cannot be.

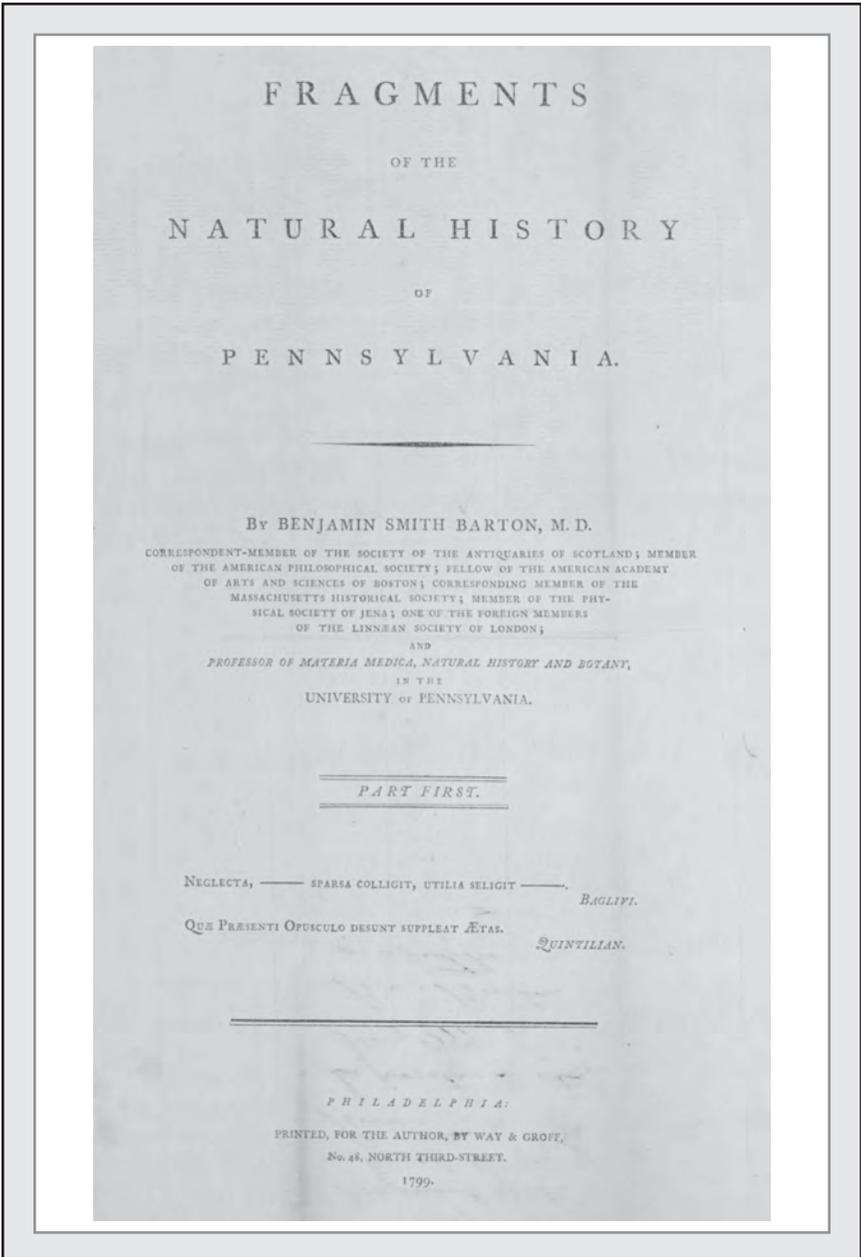
Suppose Sir William had been in charge of things at the time and the idea of travelling on horseback had been put to him. Referring to his "full employment" blueprint he could have come to the conclusion that bringing brides from neighboring tribes might cause a profusion of local spinsters. Since as breeders these females would be without work he might have decided against the idea of faster transportation. Assuming that his escape of full-employment-by-walking-only could be enforced; mankind would have been demed the horse-and-buggy, the train, the aeroplane.

The "socialization of demand," be it noted, amounts to the curbing of desires by the control of ideas. It is in fact an idea that envisions the suppression of ideas. The consuming individual shall not conjure up thoughts of goods and services which to him seem desirable, but shall find his satisfactions in the ideas pre-fabricated for him by the ideal mind—the State. Since the State is not a human, but is a word describing a person or group of persons enjoying political authority, "socialization of demand" amounts to the proposition that one person may think for another. This is an impossibility. Therefore, the suggested scheme must rest its case on the power vested in one person to curb the expression of another's imagination. It says, in effect: "You may think only of such satisfactions as I, having acquired omniscience through omnipotence, will permit you to think about."

When we examine any of the birds that buzz about the bellies of the planners we invariably find beneath its seductive plumage an insatiable lust for power. Sir William's buzzard differs from the orthodox breed in that it seeks power to determine what people shall consume rather than what they shall produce. The latter purpose would make him a Socialist; an appellation which his Britishness repels. But the nice distinction is hardly worth considering, for in the end production and consumption are the same thing, and you cannot control the one unless you can

The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was an advocacy group for the representation of women at the polls. This collection includes multiple newspapers, such as *The Analysis*.

Source: <<https://crowd.loc.gov/campaigns/organizing-for-womens-suffrage-the-nawsa-records/subject-file-e-m/mss3413201608/mss3413201608-2>>



The Copyright Title Pages Collection on the Library of Congress Transcription Center includes advertising labels, books, and maps from the 18th and early 19th centuries. This document is the cover page for the collection *Fragments of the Natural History of Pennsylvania*.

Source: <<https://crowd.loc.gov/campaigns/early-copyright/copyright-title-pages-oversize-1790-1890/2019713462/2019713462-3>>