

ACQUISITIONS AFTERNOON 2026: UNCOVERING TREASURES FROM REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA

JANUARY 20, 2026

KYLE ROBERTS: My name is Kyle Roberts, and I am the Executive Director of the Congregational Library & Archives. And welcome to one of our favorite events of the winter season, Acquisitions Afternoon. And our special guest this year is Dr. Phil Mead, who's gonna talk about uncovering treasures from early America.

To begin, I'd like to acknowledge that the Congregational Library & Archives resides in what is now known as Boston, which is in the Place of the Blue Hills, the homeland of the Massachusetts people, whose relationships and connections with the land continue to this day and into the future.

Now, for those of you who might be joining us for the first time, the Congregational Library & Archives is an independent research library. Established in 1853, the CLA's mission is to foster a deeper understanding of the spiritual, intellectual, cultural, and civic dimensions of the Congregational story and its ongoing relevance in the 21st century. We do this through free access to our research library of 225,000 books, pamphlets, periodicals, and manuscripts, as well as our digital archive, which has more than 130,000 images, many drawn from our New England's Hidden Histories project.

Throughout the year, we like to offer educational programs and research fellowships for students, scholars, churches, really anyone who's interested in Congregationalism's influence on the American story. I do hope that you will check out our website, congregationallibrary.org, to learn more about what we do and for more upcoming events.

So with that, enough from me, and let's turn it over to Heather.

HEATHER KURTZ: Thank you, Kyle. Now it is my pleasure to welcome Dr. Philip Mead as our guest speaker for our third annual Acquisitions Afternoon. Dr. Mead is the owner of Mead Americana, an antiques and ephemera business specializing in colonial and Revolutionary American militaria, books, paper, and personal objects. He holds a PhD in early American history from Harvard University.

Before starting his business, Meade served as chief historian and curator of the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia from 2011 through 2024. While there, he shaped the new museum's award-winning galleries and collections. He is lead guest curator of MoAR's 2025 to 2027 flagship exhibition entitled, "Declaration's Journey," launched for the United States' 250th celebration.

In addition, he is the coauthor of "Among His Troops: Washington's War Tent in a Newly Discovered Watercolor," and with Benjamin Lincoln, Jr., "Essays by The Free Republican, 1784-1786."

Now without further ado, Dr. Philip Mead.

PHIL MEAD: Thank you, Heather. Thank you, Kyle. Thank you so much for the invitation.

It's a real pleasure to be here, especially because I get to talk about one of my favorite topics and that is collecting Revolutionary period material, something I've done for institutions, and for myself, and now for my business and customers.

When Kyle reached out to me, I thought about, you know, what would be appropriate as a focus of this basically 20 minutes we have for my discussion. And I thought, you know, really squarely in the center of both my academic and my collecting and museum interests have been two themes. One is what motivates people for Revolution and for military service, particularly in the 18th century? And what were their sort of intellectual lives like? What was the, what were their curiosities? What were their pursuits that both motivated their service and their contributions to the formation of the United States in the case of the Revolution and also served as welcome distractions while in camp or doing that often hard service?

So my dissertation as a graduate student focused on diaries of Revolutionary soldiers. And one of the things that I frequently noticed was their reading material that they referenced in their diaries.

They're having conversations with books and also books serving as articles of trade and value for the mobile life of soldiers where currency through most of the Revolution was of limited value. Hard goods that could be carried were objects of exchange that could gain you medical treatment, better housing, some rum, some food, somebody else might serve guard duty for you, any number of things. But they also were useful objects in and of themselves as entertainment and instruction.

And for very devoted, devout, godly soldiers, like many of the troops in the Revolutionary War, they served as a sort of surrogate ministry, religious books. It was often the case that while there was a chaplaincy in the Continental Army, the chaplains were not available. And this was a particular challenge on Sabbath days where troops felt they were inadvertently or against their own control, Sabbath breaking.

So for example, I found that Harvey's "Meditations Among the Tombs and Gardens," which was published numerous times in 18th century and was an instruction manual for how travelers were to experience spirituality in the absence of a proper minister, got referenced many, many times in the soldier diaries. And I have found a few examples. I missed it, but Henry Knox's copy of the general of artillery was available a few years ago.

I wanted to show... in my collecting, I've found, and I've pursued books inscribed by soldiers in the Revolution. I think they serve as a kind of index of the variety of interests and of books that were available in camp. So I just want to quickly run through a few examples. And rather than a PowerPoint, I thought I'd show you the physical objects because it's more fun and, you know, just more unusual these days.

So this, we'll start with this one. This I found at a Papermania show in Hartford in 2007. And Bob Seymour had this, if there's any collectors who remember this. It was an unassuming copy of "Buccaneers of America" published in Glasgow in 1773. Not a particularly rare valuable book, but tipped out of it sitting in the case, Bob had written a little bookmark that just said Ticonderoga. So I asked to see it and inside was this amazing notation that says "Epaphras Lumis and Elijah Lumis, their book bought at Ticonderoga 13th day of July 1775" with the amount of York money that they spent on it.

Now these two men were older and younger brothers. They were in Benedict Arnold's troops at Ticonderoga at the time. And one of things I love about this is that it's both entertainment and perhaps a little bit of an instruction manual. It's a book about pirates and what these soldiers were about to do after having taken Ticonderoga in May was to sail up and down the lakes trying to capture British shipping quite illegally because there was still not a declaration of independence. So this was a, essentially in a way a pirate army.

Something a little closer to home for the Congregational Library, perhaps, is this book of Psalms. You can see the title page and I'll explain the silver plaque on it. This is a book of what Psalms, excuse me, the Psalms of David published in Boston. And this particular copy, you can see the inscription on the top belonged to Daniel Waldo who was from Wyndham, Connecticut, Yale class of 1784, served as a Congregational minister in both Eastern Connecticut and Rhode Island, and then became a point... was a veteran of the Continental Army. He served several tours and then lived into the age of photography. And this is a photograph of him.

He was one of seven men photographed by Harper's Weekly during the Civil War to promote the idea that veterans of the Revolution would have, were supporters of the union, and to connect those two conflicts. He was 1854 appointed chaplain of the United States House of Representatives. And the inscription on the front is to an Illinois congressman of a later generation, a veteran of World War I, Guy Mark Gillette. And there's a curious note at the bottom that says, Gillette, he ensured that the David of our generation did not go to battle with an empty slingshot, presumably supporting or thanking him for some military supplies and support.

This book, this pamphlet is another one of my favorites. This is Samuel Mather's, "America as Known to the Ancients." And the interesting thing about this copy is it was printed for Henry Knox's bookshop in 1773, famously became the commander of American artillery in the

Revolutionary War, but had a bookshop in Boston, where he used to eavesdrop on British officers making their plans during the months before the siege.

This copy is inscribed by Major William Thompson of Connecticut and Major Roger Enos of Connecticut. Enos was about to embark on the expedition through Maine to Quebec with Benedict Arnold in 1775. And I believe he probably bought this at this time. The wonderful thing about it is Mather was trying to make the argument that various European, and old world African, and even Asian settlers had arrived in America and were the descendants of many of the Native people here. So it's kind of... used Maine as an example of a place where they may have settled. So I like to think these two guys considering their move through Maine, but wanted to study that before their travels.

This is another interesting example of what was on soldiers' minds. Here's a very original binding. You can see how worn these books are that are carried by soldiers. This is a book about Oliver Cromwell that belonged to James Carr, who was a Rhode Island soldier. And he's writing in December 1782 at Fort Liberty, which was in Bristol, Rhode Island. So he's, 1782, they're worried about what happens next. And what happened in the last Anglo world revolution was a dictator rose up in the form of Oliver Cromwell. So he may be thinking about that problem and looking at this as a reference point.

This is a pocket Bible. You can see what a pocket Bible looked like in the 18th century, not easy to carry in a pocket, but you'd carry it in a knapsack or something. This is a Glasgow 1768 Old and New Testament. But this one has an inscription on the back of the New Testament title page, often a place where family records and other things will be kept, from Garrett Wyckoff, who says he was taken prisoner. And he says on it, "Garrett Wyckoff is my name, America is my nation, Freehold [which is New Jersey] is my dwelling place. And I hope Christ will be my salvation. Garrett Wyckoff, his book, 1779," after his annotation of his captivity.

Then one of my favorite diarists, not the least of which, because he frequently talked about his reading material, was a man named Henry Sewell. And he owned this first edition of Baron von Stubben's "Regulations for the Continental Army." And Sewell shared his, he inscribed it in the corner there. Sewell shared his reading material with his sergeant, a man named Elijah Gale, whose diary was published in 1918 as *Diary of a Doughboy* in an American periodical. And the complete version of that diary is, I don't know where it is, but it's photostatted in the collections of the New York Historical Society. And Sewell's diary is at the Massachusetts Historical Society. And there, in, from 1780-82 sharing novels, epistolary novels, which are on the rise, as we know, in the late 18th century. And they're critiquing whether Richardson has accurately depicted his female characters' freedoms of the will and limits of the will. And that's a particularly interesting idea.

Henry Sewell was... he was a Congregationalist. He was a soldier from 1776 to 1783. He rose from private to captain in the Massachusetts line. After the war, he became an abolitionist,

which he was through his life. He died in the 1850s. He was an anti-Mason. I don't have strong feelings about Masonic orders, but certainly anti-slavery and Revolutionary service were things I admired.

I went to my advisor, Laurel Ulrich, to talk about what a great guy I thought Henry Sewell was based on his early diaries. And I had not made the connection that he was the nemesis of Martha Ballard in Ulrich's book, "Midwives Tale," where he was always opposing basically women's rights in Maine. And Professor Ulrich said to me, well, you know... I said, boy, he was on the right side of everything. And she said, well, you know, he did lock his daughter in their attic when she became a Seventh-day Adventist for six weeks. And I thought, well, okay, I need to look into him a little bit more.

Books were traded, as I mentioned, as means of gaining medical attention. This is an example. This book, which is a medical treatise, English medical treatise from 1757, which includes among other things, instructions on how to get a better from gunshot wounds. This is a fascinating, very light inscription at this point captured at Yorktown in Virginia. And then a notation on the inside of the book explains that it was traded by a French officer coming through Newark, New York in 1782, where the Continental Army was encamped at that time, in exchange for medical services from the local physician whose family kept it. And even explains that the makeshift paper covers are due to the fact that in 1857, somebody let a rag paper collector grab it up. And when the son of the doctor found out about it, he chased the guy down and got the book back, but not before the rag man had ripped the leather covers off of it. So it was a redeemed book, but a book that was a part of this informal sort of exchange.

Another one that is particularly sort of in the vein of your institution. This is a copy of Thomas Prince's 1736 "Chronicles of New England," Prince being a minister there. He, this one was, is inscribed by Benjamin Parker. And he was a soldier from Ringe, New Hampshire, who served under Stark at the American flank at the Battle of Bunker Hill. And he's inscribed it here. His book bought in Littleton, February, 1776, upon his travels from the army to Ringe. You can see that there. It's down here, is from his travels from the army to Ringe.

So here in the winter of 1776, he is on his way home, having fought at the Battle of Bunker Hill and fought through the siege of Boston. And he wants to know the chronology of New England's history, and as a way of inserting perhaps his own life into that history and supporting that, he has further notations adding important dates to Prince's dates. So here on the left, he's noting the loss of the American fleet at Valcour Island and the challenges that the army will now face. This is one of the first naval engagements of the Revolutionary War.

And speaking of water and of naval items, this is a small pocket psalmbook from Boston printed in Boston in 1771. And this one belonged to an American privateersman who noted it, who noted his privateer service here. And what he says is that he's serving on the Charming Sally, and that their ship was captured in 1778. And then he was in prison in

Plymouth, England as a POW. And that's apparently where he bought this book, which is the red notation on the side in 1778, bought this book in Plymouth, England. So again, perhaps a way of maintaining his devotional exercises and the absence of a proper minister to him there.

Medical books are particularly sought after it seems, because they're both, they're good trade for doctors when you need medicine. The army hospitals are in their infancy. There's a terrible mortality rate when you're in them. So being able to get treatment from a private residence is really desirable.

Here's another medical book. This one is interesting because it actually belonged to... the New Compendious Dispensary from His Royal Highness the Duke of York, belonged to John Jones, who was an important doctor in Philadelphia and the author of a book on medicine that was directed to the army, but also belonged to Benjamin Porter, who was a soldier in the 10th Massachusetts regiment, as he notes here.

And then the, I guess the last thing I will mention just to round it out is music books. So music books are necessary in camp for tunes that fifes and drums call out to give commands across the army. And music books in the 18th century, when they had music scores in them had to be engraved, usually silver plates.

This one is engraved by John Ward Gilman, who's an Exeter, New Hampshire silversmith. And it belonged to George Griswold, who inscribed it his book, 1779. He was a soldier at Valcour Island, fifer, rather, at Valcour Island, that naval expedition that I mentioned earlier and that Parker put in his chronicles appendices.

So with that, I will open it up to questions. And I'd love to talk about any of these items or if you want to know where they came from or how you find things like that, I'm happy to talk about that too.

KYLE: Well, thanks so much, Phil. So when did you start, you know? And when did you know that American Revolution material, American Revolutioniana, don't know what we call it, was the area that was going to be your kind of collecting and dealing focus?

PHIL: I don't know. I mean, it's so long ago that it's, you know, it's a hazy memory. I, when I was six, I had a babysitter who I... both my parents worked. She lived in a federal period house in Connecticut. I grew up in Simsbury, Connecticut, and there was a colonial house right next door. And I used to lead the other kids on expeditions around the yard, trying to find old rusty nails and things like that. I count that sort of as the beginning of my search. And I think that it was... I grew up in a fairly modern 70s development. I was, you know, the colonial past was on the edge. It was something that was aspirational. It wasn't right in my yard, but it was nearby enough to be accessible. And I think that's sort of described my life since then.

KYLE: Well, you live actually in a colonial era house now, right? So you've achieved and you're clearly surrounding yourself with these things.

So great questions here. One person asks, what generally were the ranks of the men whose colonial Revolutionary War diaries you have seen and read?

PHIL: It's a great question. My dissertation included an appendix of the diaries that I counted in the study, formally, which was 169. But there were many more that I've discovered since and that I knew of then, but I had to draw the line somewhere to finish.

Of those, if memory serves, think about something like 79 were enlisted and the rest were officers. And I tried to focus on the lower ranks because I was, you know, part of the purpose of looking at diaries is to explore the lives of people who didn't have large letter collections survive, but to see their understandings of things move and change over time. So an individual letter might exist from a soldier, you're catching him at one instance. Whereas a diary, usually by definition, you've got at least several days, but often years where you can track how their ideas about the nation they're fighting for are shifting.

KYLE: Great. A question probably a lot of our minds from Gene Murchison. So how did you acquire all of these books?

PHIL: Well, just searching and searching. So you go to book fairs, you go to antique fairs, eBay, auctions, you develop relationships with reliable dealers. So, I mean, the Ticonderoga book I mentioned, I got from Bob Seymour. The last book I mentioned, the music book, I traded labor as a graduate student from a dealer in New Hamp... antique dealer in New Hampshire.

I had... many of these are from other dealers who knew I was looking for this sort of thing. The Yorktown book, I actually traded a sword for that from an antiquarian arms dealer who knew it was interesting, but it wasn't really his bag. The medical book that was described by the 10th Massachusetts soldier came out of Pook and Pook auctions not long ago.

The book with the metal plate that belonged to Daniel Waldo and the photograph of him, they came from a dealer here in Pennsylvania who I had befriended actually because one of my dissertation focuses on one of my... and probably my, the person I thought I would write my whole dissertation about at first was a guy named Joseph Plumb Martin. And he wrote a memoir that he published in 1830, which is delightful narrative of an enlisted soldier's viewpoint. And there was a Brunk auction that sold a number of his manuscripts, which I underbid while I was a graduate student. I had no idea how I was going to figure out a way for that. I had to have it. I didn't get them.

And then I was giving a lecture on Martin at the chapel at Valley Forge two months later. And this young guy, I had gotten permission from Brunk to put up a slide of some of the

manuscripts, and I put whereabouts unknown and this young guy in the crowd started laughing, and he introduced himself as having bought them. So we became fast friends, as you can imagine. And then he was a dealer, and I got this book from him. So it's, you know, this is, these kinds of things are, it's a many, many decades effort to try to, you know, find these.

But often, it's changed, but when I first began collecting, I remember one dealer joking with me. He said, well, being inscribed, does that make them more or less valuable? And a lot of dealers didn't have any respect for books in this condition. For me, that's part of their history. And I love that. So they were more available back then.

KYLE: That ties so nicely into a comment from Gloria Marceau who says, thanks for showing the actual books in this presentation. They are witnesses to history, right? And to, you know, I think I had a similar thought about, when you look at a Christie's auction and there's a completely pristine book that looks like it was never opened, but was published by Jefferson or Franklin versus this book that, you know, the Ticonderoga book, which, you know, probably fell in the mud and probably was, you know, shoved into a leather bag, and shows that.

A great question here from Kate Dinescu who asks, do you have an overall idea of what the general literacy rate among Revolutionary War soldiers may have been given that books were such treasured and valued possessions when men were serving in the army?

PHIL: That's a great question. There's been a lot of work on literacy in early America. And the literacy rates, the easiest way historians have found to track basic literacy is witnessing of wills, which occurred, which in communities and often included members of the family regardless of gender, sometimes even race. So based on that, the literacy rate of white men in New England was approximately 90%, and women was approximately 75%. People who... men and women of color had fewer, less access to public funded education. And so the literacy rates in those communities is lower. And in fact, one of the ways that I often was able to identify documents, both for the museum and for others as soldiers of color, was by them signing with an X or with a mark.

Interestingly, the war was an opportunity for education for many young men. And one soldier I noticed in the paperwork that survives for him, Gad Asher, who was a Freeman of color of African descent. He began the war signing with an X and he concluded the war signing Gad Asher. And he'll, he became an abolitionist in his own right. So these soldiers writing long, and in their diaries, writing long lists of words. And they're just practicing spelling and vocabulary. And so this is a, this is an incubator for education.

KYLE: That's fantastic. What a wonderful example of how, having the survival of those books provides the evidence to understand that, right? That it may not be written down anywhere else, right? They had that opportunity.

Rick Taylor asks, are you aware of any Revolutionary soldiers using publications in other languages? Are there any German, French, Spanish, or even Indigenous language books that are, that come into soldiers' hands or go out of soldiers' hands?

PHIL: Yeah, actually I have one in the other room, a Spanish language book about Western territory that belonged to a quote unquote spy in Virginia. A spy in that period often just meant somebody who was scouting. But this was, you know, he was probably in contact with Spanish speakers in various trades on the Appalachian frontier and so could read it. And then he was using those descriptions to improve his scouting work.

Certainly there, of course, in the Continental Army in Pennsylvania. There's a regiment called the German Regiment, which is almost entirely made up of German speakers. And the Declaration of Independence was, as we display in the exhibit I just finished at the museum, was published in German in its first week of publication in Philadelphia. 75,000 of the inhabitants of Pennsylvania in 1776 were native German speakers, were primarily German speakers.

So, yeah, famously there's a something called the Gunwad Bible, which was published by Christopher Sauer in Germantown before the Revolution. English language Bibles were not allowed to be printed in America under the crown. That was a protected market. But other language Bibles could be. So German language Bibles were printed in Pennsylvania. And of course, the Eliot Indian Bible published in Massachusetts in the 17th century, the first American Bible, and published in Nipmuc. So, but the Gunwad Bible is known as that supposedly because it was used as wadding and guns. That may be apocryphal.

The Psalms of David almost certainly were used at the Battle of Springfield... getting off the topic of language, but just relevant to this discussion. There was a Presbyterian minister named James Caldwell, who had the keys to the church in Springfield. And as the Americans were being overrun, and were out of cartridges, and only had loose powder, he... so they didn't have wadding for their guns, he went and got the songbooks from the church and started distributing and shouting, give 'em Watts, boys.

But yes, there are other languages. And in diaries... one of my, another one of my favorite diaries is that of John Harper Hawkins of the Canadian regiment. Canadian regiment is a mixed regiment of German, French, English speakers, etc. And he describes at one point how he feels very disenchanted by all the officers speaking all these different languages while drunk and dancing on the tables. And he himself was a former printer. And so he knew Latin. And he would often use Latin to code in his own accounts when he was remiss in one of his duties and needed to get back to it, but didn't want anybody to figure that out by casually glancing at his books.