

HELEN HARTMAN GEMMILL

Helen Hartman Gemmill, elected to the American Antiquarian Society in 1985, died at the age of eighty on December 11, 1998, in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, from complications of a stroke she had suffered several days before. In a poignant coincidence, her husband of fifty-seven years, Kenneth W. Gemmill, who had been in a declining state of health for some years, died just minutes later.

Helen's long and varied career culminated in her extraordinary service on the boards of many Philadelphia area historical and cultural institutions. Among those she served most devotedly were, with dates of service, the Bucks County Historical Society (1970-98), the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (1979-85), the Library Company of Philadelphia (1980-98), the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (1980-91; emeritus 1991-94), and Princeton Theological Seminary (1983-90).

Helen Gemmill was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, on January 10, 1918, and attended the Shippen School in that city and then Bryn Mawr College, from which she graduated in 1938. She won *Vogue* magazine's 'Prix de Paris' in her senior year with an article about the Amish and Mennonite culture in Lancaster. The fascination with local history that dominated so much of Helen's life was already in evidence. Following graduation she joined the editorial staff of *Vogue*, later moving to *Mademoiselle*.

The Gemmills married in 1941, and during the war Helen taught English at Bryn Mawr. Also in 1941, the Gemmills acquired the 400-acre Five Spruce Farm in Jamison, Bucks County. Fifteen years later, they renovated the eighteenth-century stone farmhouse there and moved in with their four children. From then on, Bucks County and its history were to become Helen's passions.

Helen's abiding interest in local history led inevitably to her almost thirty-year association with the Bucks County Historical Society. Beginning as a volunteer, she quickly made her presence felt and in 1970 was invited to join the Board. She was influential

in the rejuvenation of the Society's two museums—the Mercer Museum and Fonthill. Her unstinting efforts on behalf of the Society led to its accreditation by the American Association of Museums in 1992 and to a \$4.3 million campaign (that Helen and Kenneth co-chaired) to restore those National Historic Landmarks.

Helen's principal historical publication was *E.L.: The Bread Box Papers* (Doylestown, Penn., 1983), which had an introduction provided by James A. Michener and won a literary award from the Athenaeum of Philadelphia. While exploring Fonthill, the home of Dr. Henry Chapman Mercer, she discovered an archive containing letters and journals of Mercer's aunt, Elizabeth Chapman Lawrence (1829–1905), in a bread box. Over the next several years, Helen deciphered and transcribed the documents and used them as the basis for her biography of 'E.L.,' who was the wife of Massachusetts diplomat T. Bigelow Lawrence. 'E.L.' charmed high society at home and abroad and is reputed to have been the inspiration for the character Madeleine Lee in Henry Adams's Washington novel *Democracy*. The year after her book on 'E.L.' was published, Helen was named a 'Distinguished Daughter of Pennsylvania' by Governor Richard Thornburgh. At the time of her death, Helen was in the thick of writing her second book, a comprehensive history of Bucks County.

Helen's personal life was filled with horrible tragedy as well as amazing accomplishments. Of Helen and Kenneth's four children, they are survived only by Elizabeth H. (Betsy) Gemmill, three others having predeceased them. Yet Helen, a woman of remarkable fortitude and strength of character, managed to accept these terrible losses and continue her life of service to others.

In 1980 Helen became the first woman elected to the Board of the Library Company of Philadelphia. With her gracious air, sparkling sense of humor, and incisive observations, she was a quiet yet commanding presence during the Board's deliberations.

A passage from the resolution adopted by the Library Company's Board of Directors after Helen's death encapsulates her many fine qualities:

'As a prize-winning author acquainted with the demands of

writing history, she had a deep understanding of the inseparability of libraries, scholars, and learning. She appreciated just as clearly that, whether local or national, libraries and museums are the conservators of our cultural patrimony. Her leadership and support of the Library Company as well as other libraries and museums in Philadelphia and Bucks County greatly enriched the cultural life of our metropolitan community.'

John C. Van Horne

ALEXANDER J. WALL, JR.

Alexander J. Wall, a former President of Old Sturbridge Village, died on January 8, 1999, in Augusta, Maine, at the age of eighty-seven. Al was a long-time administrator of several institutions devoted to the preservation and interpretation of American history, and he was involved in the national leadership of the American Association for State and Local History and the American Association of Museums.

After graduation in 1934 from Columbia University, he received museum training at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and joined the New-York Historical Society library staff where his father was librarian-director. Al traveled with him to Europe to study museum exhibitions as part of the planning for the 1939 addition to the NYHS library building.

He was introduced to New England collectors on visits to Edna Little Greenwood's restored eighteenth-century house at Time Stone Farm in Marlborough, Massachusetts. Edna Greenwood's circle of book friends included Wall, Sr., Lawrence Wroth, and Clarence Brigham, who wrote that Al's father, who was elected a member of the Society in 1925, 'was the moving spirit in entertainment and sociability.'

Al married Fannie Elizabeth Lerch in 1941 and saw active duty as a captain in the Army Air Corps during World War II in the

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