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Homer Rosenberger: Learning Beyond the Classroom

Abstract

Homer Rosenberger, a Pennsylvania historian, cared deeply about sharing information. He collected books and articles on the history of PA, as well as meeting minutes for the many societies he participated in. All of this material is now stored in boxes available at Musselman Library in Gettysburg, PA. This paper is a combination of research and reflection on the experience of working with the Rosenberger collection, specifically a box that deals primarily with correspondence learning and public history.

Keywords

public history, correspondence learning, historical methods, Pennsylvania, PHMC

Disciplines

Library and Information Science | Online and Distance Education | Public History

Comments

Written for HIST 300: Historical Methods.

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Homer Rosenberger:
Learning Beyond the Classroom

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Homer Rosenberger: Learning Beyond the Classroom

Homer Rosenberger was never a professor or a teacher, but he cared deeply about sharing information. In his house on Rose Hill, he collected “more than a thousand volumes and many pamphlets on the history of Pennsylvania.”¹ He also collected meeting minutes and other materials related to societies he participated in, such as the Columbia Historical Society (CHS) and the Pennsylvania Junto. He worked to organize speakers for events of these organizations and make sure they had the information they needed, as seen in correspondence with James Rhoads about preparations for CHS’s 75th anniversary.² All of this material is now stored in boxes available at Musselman Library in Gettysburg, PA, which is where I have been tasked with delving into Box 16.

Most of the box is filled with the records of several organizations Rosenberger participated in to advance the cause of learning. One of these, which particularly sparked my attention, was the records of the PA State Board of Private Correspondence Schools. He took part in the Training Officers Conference, chairing it twice—first 1949 to 1950 and then 1955 to 1957.³ He was also involved in public history through the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Additionally, he had saved some records from the American Society for Engineering Education, which he attended while working for the Bureau of Public Roads.⁴ However, the box was not solely about his learning and teaching activities. He also kept letters from several prominent men who, as he noted on the folder where he kept their correspondence, he considered “great minds.” Some of these men shared his interest in history, while others had

¹ Homer T. Rosenberger to Enos H. Horst, October 27, 1967, Homer Rosenberger Papers, Box 16, Gettysburg College Archives (hereafter GCA).

² James Rhoads to Homer Rosenberger, “Great Minds/Men Whom I’ve Had the Privilege to Associate With Rather Intimately” folder (hereafter “Great Minds” folder), Rosenberger Papers, Box 16, GCA.

³ Ellen B. Kesler, “Training Officers Conference—An Abbreviated History”, 1978, “TOC” folder, Rosenberger Papers, Box 16, GCA.

⁴ Postcard from E. W. Jones to Homer T. Rosenberger, June 7, 1965, “ASEE Meeting 6-65” folder, Rosenberger Papers, Box 16, GCA.

similar bureaucratic backgrounds. Historians he corresponded with include academics like Lehigh University professor Dr. Lawrence Gipson and public historians like archivist of the United States James Rhoads. Other acquaintances whom he considered to be “great minds” included the vice president of the National Geographic Society Leonard Carmichael, Congressman Fred Schwengel, Federal Highway Administrator F. C. Turner, and Judge Linton M. Collins.

I was especially intrigued by Rosenberger’s work with correspondence schools and set out to find more information on their history. Pitman Shorthand is credited with creating the first correspondence course in 1852, which covered stenography.⁵ Early correspondence schools did not confer course credit. In fact, some correspondence schools for women were seen as in opposition to the movement to get women in credit-bearing college programs, because the schools were aimed at educating women within the domestic sphere.⁶ This conflict between college credit and correspondence did not last forever, though. College programs began by 1892 with the University of Chicago, and then grade schools with “supervised correspondence learning” followed by 1905.⁷ Rosenberger ran vocational correspondence programs in the United States Office of Education and the Departments of Justice and Commerce between 1935 and 1965, which qualified him to then evaluate programs for the state of Pennsylvania.⁸

It was in Rosenberger’s records from the PA State Board of Private Correspondence Schools that I found what I consider to be one of the most interesting items in the box: a

⁵ Denise M. Casey, “A Journey to Legitimacy: The Historical Development of Distance Education through Technology”, *TechTrends: Linking Research & Practice to Improve Learning* 52, no. 2 (March 2008): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-008-0135-z>.

⁶ Harriet F. Bergmann, “‘The Silent University’: The Society to Encourage Studies at Home, 1873-1897,” *The New England Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2001): 447–8.

⁷ Casey, “A Journey to Legitimacy”; Ossian MacKenzie and Edward L. Christensen, *The Changing World of Correspondence Study: International Readings* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University), 35.

⁸ Homer T. Rosenberger to Senator D. Elmer Hawbaker, September 6, 1967, “PA. State Board of Private Corres. Schools Appointments” Folder, Rosenberger Papers, Box 16, GCA.

memorandum from the Acting Superintendent of Public Instruction to all school administrators of Pennsylvania. This memorandum was regarding new regulations that allowed students in both primary and secondary school to “earn course credit through correspondence study” for all authorized courses, regardless of whether they were capable of attending traditional school.⁹ This memorandum represented a change in the valuation of correspondence study. Early U.S. correspondence programs, like the one run from the Calvert Day School, catered to disabled and international students who could not attend school in person in the United States.¹⁰ Australian correspondence schools were similar: students could receive course credit, but only if they did not have the option of being in a traditional school due to distance or disability.¹¹ These regulations implied that a classroom education was superior to one conducted by correspondence. Around the time of the memorandum, researchers were still concerned about the “image problem” with correspondence schooling, where it was seen as a less credible form of education despite research proving it equally effective.¹² By stating that it was worth the same credit, Hoffman legitimized correspondence education.

As I read through his records, I found myself wondering what Rosenberger would think of our current state of education. My brother William is a twice-exceptional student; he is gifted intellectually, but also has a developmental disability. For this reason, he has at times used one of the modern successors of correspondence education: an online learning platform called Edgenuity. He watched recorded lessons from a teacher, then completed exercises on his own, which were then graded by the computer. Using Edgenuity allowed him to work at a higher

⁹ George W. Hoffman, “Superintendent’s Memorandum No. XXXI: Administrative Procedures Pertaining to Correspondence Study Effective September 1, 1966”, July 1, 1965, “PA. State Board of Private Correspondence Schools” Folder, Rosenberger Papers, Box 16, GCA.

¹⁰ MacKenzie and Christensen, *The Changing World of Correspondence Study*, 37-38.

¹¹ K. S. Cunningham, *Primary Education by Correspondence* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1931), 34.

¹² MacKenzie and Christensen, *The Changing World of Correspondence Study*, 220-221.

grade level for math than the rest of his classes and progress through the work faster than a classroom environment would allow. From its early stages, this was seen as one of the advantages of correspondence education. Students were able to work at their own pace, as long as there were sufficient teachers to grade the work as it was completed.¹³ This helped both students who tended to work faster than average, like William, allowing them to remain engaged in the content, and those who tended to work slower than average, saving them from the “tragedy” of having to repeat a grade.¹⁴

One of the ways in which Edgenuity differs from correspondence education in Rosenberger’s time is the lack of personal connection formed between student and teacher. During the days of Australian correspondence education, teachers were responsible for frequent check-ins with their students.¹⁵ Teachers and students in correspondence schools thus formed a “personal friendliness” that led researchers to theorize that they knew each other better than teachers and students in a classroom environment.¹⁶ The correspondents in the Society to Encourage Studies at Home were often similarly-aged women, who sometimes fostered deep connections through letters and annual Boston gatherings.¹⁷ It is unfortunate that as new technology has replaced letter writing, the connections that came through that medium have also been diminished. Rosenberger may have chosen not to accredit a school like Edgenuity due to this failure.

Another area of learning in which Rosenberger worked was the development of training for government employees, specifically through the Training Officers Conference.¹⁸ This conference began in 1938 in response to an executive order by President Franklin Delano

¹³ Cunningham, *Primary Education by Correspondence*, 44.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁷ Bergmann, “The Silent University”, 447–8.

¹⁸ Kesler, “Training Officers Conference—An Abbreviated History”.

Roosevelt mandating that heads of personnel in the federal bureaucracy supervise employee training in their departments.¹⁹ During World War II, the need for training programs expanded significantly.²⁰ After the war, training was still important for returning veterans and those employees moving out of the defense sector to other industries.²¹ To meet this need, the federal government adapted programs first used in the private sector. The Training Officers Conference's monthly newsletters and luncheons, annual institutes, and occasional directory publications helped to connect those working in this burgeoning field to each other and to new developments.²² I did not realize prior to investigating this box that the field of employee training was relatively new. I clearly remember my first days at several retail jobs, which included recorded video training modules on everything from safe usage of conveyor belts to why we should not sign a union card. It is hard for me to imagine what it would be like to start a new job without this kind of training.

The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (hereafter PHMC) was first established as the Pennsylvania Historical Commission in 1903, and then renamed in 1945.²³ Its function is to “administer a network of approximately 60 museums and historic properties” throughout Pennsylvania.²⁴ In addition to these locations, the Commission was also responsible for placing and caring for historical markers and approving all “historical monuments, memorials, buildings, tablets and inscriptions” that were funded, fully or partially, by the state of Pennsylvania.²⁵ The Commission was also permitted to conduct historical research, which would

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, “Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Marks Anniversary June 6”, June 5, 1975, “PHMC” folder, Rosenberger Papers, Box 16, GCA.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Donald H. Kent, “Specific Powers of the Pennsylvania and Historical Museum Commission”, April 1976, “PHMC” folder, Box 16, Rosenberger Papers, Box 16, GCA.

then become the property of the state.²⁶ Finally, the Commission was responsible for maintaining public records and the State Archives.²⁷ Among his PHMC records, Rosenberger saved a significant amount of material related to Ferne Smith Hetrick, who served as chair of the organization and gave “thousands of hours” to the commission’s work but was eventually not reinstated due to being, as he said, “a controversial gal.”²⁸

Separated out in this box is correspondence specifically dealing with the PHMC’s magazine. In 1974, the PHMC began publishing a twenty-four page magazine called *Pennsylvania Heritage*.²⁹ The purpose of this magazine was to “recognize achievements” and “foster the continual growth” of organizations working in the realm of Pennsylvania history as well as to cover interesting stories related to that topic.³⁰ Rosenberger was enthusiastic about the magazine, especially the Bicentennial issue.³¹

Although a significant portion of Box 16 is devoted to the work of these organizations, Rosenberger also saved individual correspondence here. He placed most of this in a folder labeled “Great Minds/Men Whom I’ve Had the Privilege to Associate With Rather Intimately.” However, Rosenberger set aside a letter written by Herbert Hoover.³² It was also preserved in a way that no other letters were: by placing it in a plastic sleeve. What makes this level of preservation interesting is the lack of substance in the letter, which reads in its entirety:

²⁶ Ibid., 6.

²⁷ Ibid., 7-8.

²⁸ Homer Rosenberger, handwritten note, February 29, 1976, on George R. Dowdell, “State Historical Commissions Resolution Recognizes Former Chairman’s Work”, “PHMC” folder, Rosenberger Papers, Box 16, GCA.

²⁹ Betty L. Seanor to Homer T. Rosenberger, October 14, 1975, “Launching PA. Heritage, 1974” folder, Rosenberger Papers, Box 16, GCA.

³⁰ Betty L. Seanor to Editorial Board Members, April 20, 1976, “Launching PA. Heritage, 1974” folder, Rosenberger Papers, Box 16, GCA.

³¹ Homer Rosenberger to Bill Wewer, January 17, 1976, “PHMC” folder, Rosenberger Papers, Box 16, GCA.

³² Herbert Hoover to Homer Rosenberger, November 21, 1960, “An Interesting Letter” folder, Rosenberger Papers, Box 16, GCA.

I regret that I have, at 86 years, arrived at some restrictions on my activities and I simply cannot commit myself to engagements a year hence. I am sorry. Nevertheless, I do very much appreciate the honor of your invitation.³³

What Rosenberger invited Hoover to do is unclear, as the letter is alone in the folder without context. However, the value is not entirely a mystery. Hoover's signature, as a former president, may have been interesting enough to make up for the rather banal content.

This is the most direct connection between Rosenberger and a president in Box 16, but he also holds a significant connection with former president Ulysses S. Grant through his grandson, General Ulysses S. Grant III. On Grant III's memorial packet, Rosenberger notes that he was "a great friend."³⁴ Like his grandfather, Grant III served in the army; he was also involved in the beautification of DC as Director of Public Buildings and Public Parks and later chairing the National Capital Park and Planning Commission.³⁵ He probably knew Rosenberger through the Columbia Historical Society, which he was the president of for many years.³⁶ They corresponded frequently, both about CHS and personal matters. For example, Grant sent Rosenberger an apology letter because he had had to leave a party Rosenberger had invited him to since it was too crowded.³⁷ Reading this letter made the historical figure seem more real to me, because I also do not like overly crowded events. I could imagine myself sending a text to one of my housemates saying pretty much the same thing, half a century later.

Rosenberger also kept material related to the Presidential Prayer breakfasts. He attended this event in 1961, which led its sponsors, International Christian Leadership, Inc., to ask him for

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Homer Rosenberger, handwritten note on memorial service pamphlet for Ulysses S. Grant III, "U. S. Grant, 3rd" folder, Rosenberger Papers, GCA.

³⁵ "Gen. U. S. Grant 3d Dies; Grandson of President", *The Evening Star* (Washington), August 29, 1968, "U. S. Grant, 3rd" folder, Rosenberger Papers, GCA.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ulysses S. Grant to Homer Rosenberger, November 14, 1967, "U. S. Grant, 3rd" folder, Rosenberger Papers, GCA.

funding later in the year.³⁸ Rosenberger also saved news coverage of this event, which includes portions of a speech by then-President John F. Kennedy.³⁹ Kennedy is reported to have said that “each President has placed a special trust in God” and “those [Presidents] strongest intellectually were also strongest spiritually.”⁴⁰ In this same article, then-Vice President Lyndon Johnson is reported to have said that “the principle of separation of church and state [...] has no stronger defender than the man who sits with us this morning as the President of the United States.”⁴¹ This was a new interpretation of the First Amendment for me. I knew that all of our presidents so far have been Christians, but I did not realize that religion was seen as an obviously necessary part of the presidency before. I wonder whether this has changed over the fifty years since the article was written, or whether it is a prevalent belief that I avoided exposure to because I did not grow up in a church community. I tend to think of religion and morality as related but ultimately separate—perhaps that is less common of a belief as I previously believed.

Another thing I found odd in the box was the way that Rosenberger saved many of his newspaper clippings. When I have wanted to save a newspaper article in the past, I have either saved the entire newspaper as is or cut out the article and placed it in a scrapbook. Rosenberger tended to take a different approach. Many of his saved newspaper pages are cut on wavy lines, and it is not always clear which article in particular he wished to remember. Sometimes portions of articles are saved on the edge of a page. This means that some information is missing compared to if he had saved the page in its entirety. Choices like these show that Rosenberger was far from a perfect collector. He was an ordinary man, with a large home and the ability to fill

³⁸ Roy F. Cooke to Homer T. Rosenberger, July 18, 1961, “Presidential Prayer Breakfasts” folder, Rosenberger Papers, GCA.

³⁹ “Kennedy Speaks to 1,000 at Prayer Breakfast”, *The Evening Star* (Washington), February 9, 1961, “Presidential Prayer Breakfasts” folder, Rosenberger Papers, GCA.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

it as he saw fit. In collecting so eclectically, he reveals not just the history of Pennsylvania or any other particular topic, but his own history and personality.

At first, I was intimidated by Rosenberger's collection. I have used the archival records in Special Collections before but only within processed collections. For example, last year I did a project on McKnight Hall. Then, I started with the Glatfelter histories before diving into primary sources. This project was the reverse of that—starting with the primary sources and archival materials and then getting more context from secondary sources. It was initially more difficult because I had not done that sort of work before, but I ended up enjoying it. I would have never chosen to research correspondence schools on my own—I did not even know they existed prior to this project. I may never have found Rosenberger's box 16 on my own, even if it had been processed. Nothing in it related to a pre-existing interest of mine. But now, I have realized that correspondence schools are important to understanding the history of education for disabled students, which is a future topic I would like to research. This project has taught me a valuable lesson in casting a wide net when doing research. If I am stuck on a topic for future work, in this class or another, I may ask Carolyn Sautter to select a random box for me. This was a good way to get out of my fixed ideas about my preferred research process and discover something new.

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