

## Brantz Mayer and the Walam Olum Manuscript

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Brantz Mayer, Baltimore lawyer, diplomat, historian, antiquarian, collector of bibliographical Americana, and Civil War veteran, acquired the manuscript copy of Rafinesque's Lenape (Delaware) Indian record the Walam Olum sometime during the decade of the 1840's, and the manuscript was in his possession January 1876. That he also had all or a portion of the either bark or stick mnemonic tally record pictures is a possibility. Through a series of most fortuitous circumstances this material fell into his hands, eventually was "rediscovered" by Daniel Brinton, and the manuscript is now in the archives of the Brinton Memorial Library in the University Museum at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia.

When Samuel Constantine Rafinesque died in Philadelphia, the 18th of September, 1840, a small group of Philadelphians, among them C. A. Poulsen and S. S. Haldeman, attended the sale of his only earthly possessions consisting of books, manuscripts, drawings, specimens etc.; and for practically nothing those gentlemen of science acquired the small portion of material saved for posterity. The great balance, cart loads of it, was scattered on the Philadelphia dumps. Among the items so rescued, those known to be still in existence have been gathered up and are now housed in the libraries of a few of our larger institutions of learning.

From the *American Journal of Science and Arts*, known popularly as Silliman's Magazine after its editor, Benjamin Silliman professor at Yale College, (vol. 42, New Haven, 1842: page 287) we discover that C. A. Poulsen of Philadelphia and S. S. Haldeman (at that time) possess many of Rafinesque's unpublished MSS. and drawings. This statement occurs in Haldeman's article appearing in this issue, under the title: *Notice of the Zoological Writings of the Late C. S. Rafinesque*. A year earlier in the same Journal (vol. 40, No. 2, New Haven, 1841) the botanist Asa Gray published his famous: *Notice of the Botanical Writings of the Late C. S. Rafinesque*. Dr. Henry A. Pilsbry, in conversation with the writer at the Academy of Natural Sciences, in Philadelphia: October, 1943, said—"S. S. Haldeman, the zoologist, acquired Rafinesque's papers, drawings and specimens on zoology, botany, shells, and fishes; that he kept the material on zoology; and presented to the Academy of Natural Sciences at Philadelphia the Rafinesque material on botany and shells, under the presentation notice: 'Original MSS. of Rafinesque presented to the Academy by S. S. Haldeman, Nov. 13, 1849.' The papers on fishes, but not the specimens relating thereto, Haldeman gave to the United States National Museum, Washington." The placement of other items acquired by men of science is a matter of record, and occasionally even now after one hundred years additional placements are discovered. For example: The archives of the Chester County Historical Society, West

Chester, Pennsylvania, contain a letter written by Peter A. Browne, professor of geology and mineralogy at Lafayette college, Easton, Pennsylvania, and a corresponding member of the Chester County Cabinet of Natural Science (life of this organization—from 1826 to 1850). The letter, dated from Philadelphia, September 26, 1841, reads thus: "To the Cabinet of Natural Science of West Chester, Gentlemen: I beg your acceptance of the accompanying two small MS. volumes of the late Professor C. S. Rafinesque. I am —— (signed) P. A. Browne." So varied were the research activities and so voluminous the writings of this unpredictable genius Rafinesque, there is no telling where material of his may be turned up in the future out of the saved remnants of his vast production.

Brantz Mayer (1809-1879) the son of German immigrants, was educated and prepared for the legal profession in Baltimore and at adjacent Maryland schools. In the year 1841 he was appointed secretary of the American Legation in Mexico City, and spent one year (from November 1841 to November 1842) in Mexico. While there he developed a great interest in Mexican history and archaeology. Returning to the United States, he landed at New Orleans, December 1842; and immediately upon reestablishing himself in Baltimore, began a long series of writings on Mexican history and prehistory which were continued throughout the rest of his life. Incidental to our subject, he wrote a most interesting and authoritative history of Mexico which had a wide distribution in the United States and in Europe because of its timely appearance just before the outbreak of our Mexican War. One of Mayer's prime objectives which he set for himself at this time was the organization of a historical society in the State of Maryland. Gathering together a group of interested associates he developed the idea until in January 1844 a called meeting held in Baltimore set in motion the preliminary organization of the Maryland Historical Society. April 5 of the same year a permanent organization was effected. Mayer was elected the Society's secretary, which position he held until elevated to its presidency after the death of General Smith, the Society's first president, in the year 1867.

In *Niles' National Register* (Baltimore, vol. 67, No. 20, page 312) for January 18, 1845, appeared the following: "*Maryland Historical Society.*" The regular monthly meeting of the Society was held at the historical rooms, on Thursday evening, Dec. 5th, (1844.) - - - - From Brantz Mayer, esq., was received - - - - also pieces of birch bark with picture writing and hieroglyphics by northwestern Indians, and other curiosities." Throughout the eastern States in the 1840's "northwestern Indians" meant Indians in the old Northwest Territory. Whether or not those "pieces of birch bark with picture writing and hieroglyphics" were Walam Olum pictographs probably one will ever know. A visit to the Society disclosed no description of the gift, and only the knowledge that it was removed from the archives by the donor. On the Society's Gift Book opposite the recording of the gift is the following pencil notation: "Withdrawn by him, September 29, 1875. B. M."

In addition to his active interest in history and archaeology, Mayer developed a kindred interest, the collection of rare Americana, as sub-

sequent incidents proved. Certain it is that he acquired the Walam Olum some time during the decade of the 1840's, but under what circumstance and from whom is still a mystery. June 1847, the Smithsonian Institution accepted for publication the now famous volume of E. G. Squier and E. H. Davis: *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*, published the following year—1848. On page XXXVI the following is quoted from the authors: "Several plans and notices ----- are presented in the succeeding chapters, upon the authority of the late Prof. C. S. Rafinesque. This gentleman, while living, devoted considerable attention to the antiquities of the Mississippi valley. ----- His notes and plans ----- at his death found their way into the possession of Brantz Mayer, Esq., of Baltimore, late Secretary of the American Legation to Mexico. This gentleman placed them in the hands of the authors, with liberty to make use of the information they contained." The authors did not mention the Walam Olum in their volume, but that this manuscript was included in the material loaned to them, to be more correct loaned by Mayer direct to Squier, is attested as follows. Squier, in the same year *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* came off the press (1848), read a paper on Rafinesque and the Walam Olum Record before the New York Historical Society. A copy of this rare pamphlet autographed by the author is in the archaeological library of the Indiana Historical Society. Squier's paper was reprinted in the *American Whig Review*, New York, February, 1849; and later in the *Indian Miscellany*, edited by W. W. Beach, (Albany, 1877). April 11, 1851, Mayer wrote to Spencer F. Baird, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, as follows, extract quoted: "I shall now write to Mr. Squier for the Rafinesque papers." (Bureau of American Ethnology, William N. Fenton, letter January 27, 1944: *In S. F. B. Letters Received, Book 1.*)

After 1851 the subsequent history of the Walam Olum lies shrouded in mystery until the suggestion of its reappearance, forecasting the history of January, 1876, comes to light in the withdrawal of the Indian "hieroglyphics" from the Maryland Historical Society, September 29, 1875. Meanwhile, in the year 1870, Bangs, Merwin and Company, 694 and 696 Broadway, New York City, N.Y., issued a "*Catalogue of a Choice Collection of Books*, in various departments of literature, including the entire library belonging to Col. Brantz Mayer, of Baltimore, Md., comprising an extensive and valuable series of books relating to the History of Maryland, Mexico, Central America, etc., etc., Also, a Large and Unique Series of Tracts relating to Maryland and the Southern Rebellion, Works relating to the Indians, Indian Narratives, etc. . . . N.B. A large number of Mr. Mayer's Books are Illustrated with Autograph Letters." This collection was advertised for sale at auction on Monday, September 26, and five days following, the year 1870. A copy of this catalogue has been presented by Mr. Jacob Blanck, New York City, N.Y., to the archaeological library of the Indiana Historical Society—a volume of 180 pages containing a list of 2,452 items, the first 1,612 of which were from the Mayer library. *Rafinesque items are not listed.* This sale was evidently arranged the year before Mayer went to California in 1871 for a visit combining legal work for eastern clients and a vaca-

tion. He had arranged his affairs in Baltimore, including his resignation as president of the Maryland Historical Society. What may have been his ideas at this time concerning the value of the Rafinesque papers as either scientific papers, historical documents, items of Americana, or a combination of these, no one knows. Whatever may have been the conditions, the Walam Olum was still in his possession January 30, 1876. In the summer of 1875 he had returned from California to Baltimore: As he wrote to his friend, John A. McAllister, of Philadelphia, in a letter from Baltimore dated March 3, 1876: extract quoted: "Last summer [I] came back to Baltimore to pass the rest of my days." (Ms: Brantz Mayer letters: the Library Company of Philadelphia.) It was in September of this year that he removed from the Historical Society's collections the Indian pictographs (so-called "hieroglyphics"), which he had presented to the Society thirty-one years before. The following January 30, 1876, he bound in a brown manila paper wrapper his Rafinesque material. The outside cover bears his name and address, to wit: "Brantz Mayer, Esq., Maryland Hist. Society, Baltimore, Maryland." On the reverse inside cover in his handwriting in black ink, he wrote the following:

"Memorandum: The enclosed original papers in the Manuscript of Mr. Rafinesque were given to me some thirty years ago— (loaned by me to Squier when writing his ANTIQUITIES with Davis—) and contain the first real antiquarian researches in the U. States, properly undertaken. Brantz Mayer, Sunday, January -30- 1876." Below the signature and date he wrote—"Rafinesque papers American Antiquities Ancient geography and his Olum Wolum."

After his return to Baltimore in 1875, Mayer must have continued his collecting of bibliographic Americana, because a few months after his death at Baltimore in 1879, Sullivan Bros. and Libbie, of Boston, offered for sale by auction on November 11-12-13 of that year some six hundred listings containing thirteen hundred items of Mayer's personal and collected manuscripts, books, drawings and related materials. A copy of this catalogue is in the collections of the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore. *No Rafinesque items are listed in this catalogue.* At least a partial assembly of the purchasers from this sale was discovered. Inquiries to them as to whether Rafinesque items came into their possession from this sale drew only negative replies.

Daniel G. Brinton had no knowledge of the whereabouts of the Walam Olum manuscript in 1883. In his *Aboriginal American Authors* (Philadelphia, 1883) he discusses the Walam Olum at some length, and characterizes it as one of the most curious examples of aboriginal American authorship: a short account of the early history of the Delaware tribe, "written in that idiom, with mnemonic symbols attached." He essays a short history of the Rafinesque document, tracing it finally into the possession of E. G. Squier. He concludes his notice with the statement (page 2, N.B.)—"I have not been able to find the original." Two years later when his *Lenape and Their Legends*, which contained his great treatise on Rafinesque's Walam Olum, was published (Philadelphia, 1885) the work had been done from the original Rafinesque manuscript. It is evident that in 1883 he had no knowledge of Mayer's

connection with the material, which is quite strange in view of the Squier and Davis statement in their *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*. However the case may have been, shortly after his 1883 publication it is evident that some person was able to inform Brinton of the then present ownership of the document. The only statement so far discovered in this connection is in Brinton's monograph *Record of Study in Aboriginal American Languages* (printed for private distribution, Media, Pennsylvania, 1898: page 12)—“The beliefs and customs of the Delawares of the present day . . . I collected in the article *Lenape Conversations* (American Journal of Folk-Lore, vol. 1, 1888.) A few years previous I had succeeded in obtaining the singular MS. referred to by C. S. Rafinesque in 1836 (in his *American Nations*, Philadelphia, 1836), as the ‘Painted Record of the Delaware Indians, the Walam Olum.’” A copy of this very rare pamphlet has been presented to the Indiana Historical Society by Dr. J. Alden Mason, of Philadelphia, on behalf of the University Museum and the Philadelphia Archaeological Society, co-trustees of the Brinton scientific and archaeological printed literature housed in the Brinton Memorial Library at the University Museum.

In conclusion, and summarizing our material, the Walam Olum passed from its Delaware Indian keepers through the mysterious Dr. Ward to Rafinesque. At his death it was rescued from oblivion by an unknown “man of science,” and shortly thereafter (between 1840 and 1846) came into the possession of Brantz Mayer, who kept it “some thirty years.” After Mayer’s death in 1879 the manuscript through some channel or channels was acquired by Brinton (between 1883 and 1884 or 1885). By him it was presented to the University Museum, Philadelphia, where it is now stored in the archives. There is no knowledge to confirm the possibility of authenticating the mnemonic pictographs referred to as Walam Olum pictures. However the coincidence of their history, slight as it may be, paralleling the history of the manuscript vouches for the necessity of this inclusion.

In so far as his fine discriminating scholarship permitted him to judge, Brinton affirmed the authenticity of the Walam Olum document as a transcription, possibly in abbreviated form, of the ancient Lenape (Delaware) Indian story of creation, their deluge version, and subsequent history, originally and for many generations passed down by word of mouth with the aid of memory stimulating pictorial mnemonic symbols accumulated through the generations in the substance of a bundle or bundles of either bark or stick tally records.