

acquaintance. A few loose ends may be permissible when plying disparate strands of evidence, but these are too many to be believed.

We do not have to work so hard if we allow the Bridgham miniature to be the source of the Sussex Declaration. If we accept that hypothesis, we do not have to explain away the damage in the title, the errors in the text, the absence of the long s, and the profusion of misspelled names. We do not need a secret code to understand the reordering of the signatures. We are not obliged to excuse the poor quality of parchment, the marks of neglect, and the amateurish work of the copyist if he was engaged in a penmanship exercise rather than a “ceremonial” commission. We can even dispense with the provenance research if the manuscript came to the West Sussex Record Office by way of a local history collector who had only a tangential relationship with the Richmond family. At this point we can only guess where the collector obtained it, but we could consider the possibility that Bridgham brought copies of the miniature to England and that one of them piqued the curiosity of the copyist. After the novelty wore off, the parchment was folded up and filed away until it was retrieved by the collector. Speculation along those lines may be tempting but is not necessary to vouch for the priority of the miniature.

Allen and Sneff published their findings in a bibliographical journal and then used that publication as the premise for their account of the Constitutional Convention. They are political historians who want to get the dating questions out of the way so they can do what they do best, a study of James Wilson’s political philosophy. Allen is James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard University, director of the Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation, and author of *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (2014). Sneff worked at the Declaration Resources Project before completing a doctorate in American history with an emphasis on material culture and history of the book. By no means are they the first to use bibliographical analysis as an avenue for research in other fields, but this approach has obstacles and limitations that can be overcome only by observing its rules and regulations. Every field has its own methodology and this one is no exception: a rigorous routine is needed to ensure the orderly analysis of texts produced in quantity.

Bibliographers have learned the hard way about the dangers of examining documents in isolation. High spots deserve extra effort, but it is not enough to focus on milestones of history, landmarks in philosophy, breakthroughs in science, and canonical works of literature. The context is important too if only as a gauge of value and a basis for comparison. In fact, Allen and Sneff do have a bibliographical context for their work. Along with the documentation about the Sussex manuscript, the Declaration Resources Project website offers a pdf catalogue of Declaration editions and manuscripts listing 747 items from 1776 through 1826, plus an additional manuscript appended in June 2023. The catalogue tracks the dissemination of this text in different formats—books, periodicals, prints, and broadsides—a commendable attempt to be comprehensive. It helps, for example, to explain the patriotic mindset of the printmaker John Binns, who featured the text in his newspaper long before he produced the print.