

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **Library Company Acquires Rare 1739 Text Owned by Peter Collinson**

### ***History of London Folio Displays Broad Interests of Colonial Philadelphia Benefactor***

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania – June 7, 2012 – At the recent New York Antiquarian Book Fair, a serendipitous alignment led the Library Company of Philadelphia to acquire a copy of the first edition of William Maitland’s gorgeous folio *History of London* (1739) that belonged to Peter Collinson (1694-1768) and was heavily annotated by him throughout.

Historians of colonial Philadelphia, and a handful of rare book lovers, know that Englishman Peter Collinson played an enormous role in the life and career of Benjamin Franklin. Not only did Collinson “discover” Franklin, send him scientific equipment for experiments in electricity, and introduce him to members of the Royal Society for the first time, he also served as the first book purchasing agent for the Library Company of Philadelphia, Franklin’s historic experiment in democratizing knowledge.

One such specialist who knew about the connection between Collinson and the Library Company was John O’Mara of London bookseller Maggs Bros, Ltd. Seeing the Maitland volume on display by Black Swan Books, he was sure that the Library Company would jump at the chance to own this document of Collinson’s encyclopedic knowledge and interests. Fortunately, Library Company Trustees Davida Deutsch and Clarence Wolf were on hand and were able to arrange the purchase of the volume for \$12,000 within minutes of O’Mara’s bringing them to see it. (The volume is also important to the Library Company because Trustee Elizabeth McLean recently co-authored *Peter Collinson and the Eighteenth-Century Natural History Exchange*.)

### ***History of London***

The History includes a frontispiece folding plate of London in 1560 and 24 original engraved plates, three of which fold. Over his years of ownership, Collinson tipped in numerous additional plates, plans, notes, documents, and clippings, with the last note dated just two years before his death. The hundreds of annotations and notes in Collinson’s hand deal with both the changing physical fabric of the city of London—such as three folio-sized pages inserted at the beginning that are filled with Collinson’s observations about buildings and development—and events of daily life, ranging from a harrowing account of bear-baiting; the fashion for fathingales and flat bonnets; and observation of the anniversary of the Restoration of King Charles, May 29, 1765. A very rich portrait of the greatest city in the world at that time emerges with remarkable vividness in these firsthand accounts. Throughout, Collinson’s

additions reflect the inquiring and engaging mind of an 18th-century gentleman of the Enlightenment who corresponded with notable scientists in London and abroad.

While Collinson was in the habit of thoroughly annotating the books he read, he seems to have intended this book for posterity. In one such note—dated October 7, 1757, and signed "Peter Collinson, FRS" or Fellow of the Royal Society—Collinson expressed the hope that “evidences of my Love & Long Experience on planting and Gardening etc. etc will remain for Ages by the Great Quantity of Seeds I for many years Imported from Pennsylvania & Virginia without any profit or advantage, but only to Oblige my Numerous Friends, amongst the Nobility & Gentry & to improve my Country.”

#### Peter Collinson and Colonial Philadelphia

Collinson was introduced to the Library Company through the scrivener-naturalist Joseph Breintnall, who served as the Library’s first Secretary. As a result, Collinson donated copies of Isaac Newton’s *Principia* and Philip Miller’s *Gardeners Dictionary* to the Library in 1732. In his capacity as agent for the Library Company in London, Collinson sent information about “curious facts relative to electricity” along with a tube for experiments. This gift sparked Franklin’s interest in electricity and led to the series of letters that were later published under Collinson’s supervision as *Experiments and Observations on Electricity*. Bernard Cohen, in his book *Benjamin Franklin’s Experiments*, remarked that “Collinson [was] the most important single person in Franklin’s career.”

Joseph Breintnall also encouraged Collinson to pursue a correspondence with John Bartram, who would famously found Bartram’s Garden, America’s oldest living botanical preserve. Collinson encouraged the shareholders of the Library Company to make Bartram a member free of charge as it would “reflect a great honour on the Society for taking Notice of a Deserving man who has not that Effluence of Fortune to be a subscriber But who has a great Genius which may be greatly improved by having a free Access to the Library.” In packages of books sent to the Library Company, Collinson enclosed packets of European seeds and botanical books intended for Bartram.

#### Library Company of Philadelphia

The Library Company of Philadelphia is an independent research library specializing in American history and culture from the 17th through the 19th centuries. Founded in 1731 by Benjamin Franklin, the Library Company is America’s oldest cultural institution and served as the Library of Congress from the Revolutionary War to 1800. The Library Company was the largest public library in America until the Civil War and includes the extensive personal libraries of prominent early American bibliophiles such as

James Logan. Open to the public free of charge, the Library Company houses an extensive collection of rare books, manuscripts, broadsides, ephemera, prints, photographs, and works of art, and the second largest holding of early American imprints. Particular strengths of the collection include economic history, women’s history, African American history, history of medicine, history of philanthropy, and visual culture. To find out more, please visit [www.librarycompany.org](http://www.librarycompany.org).

Contact:

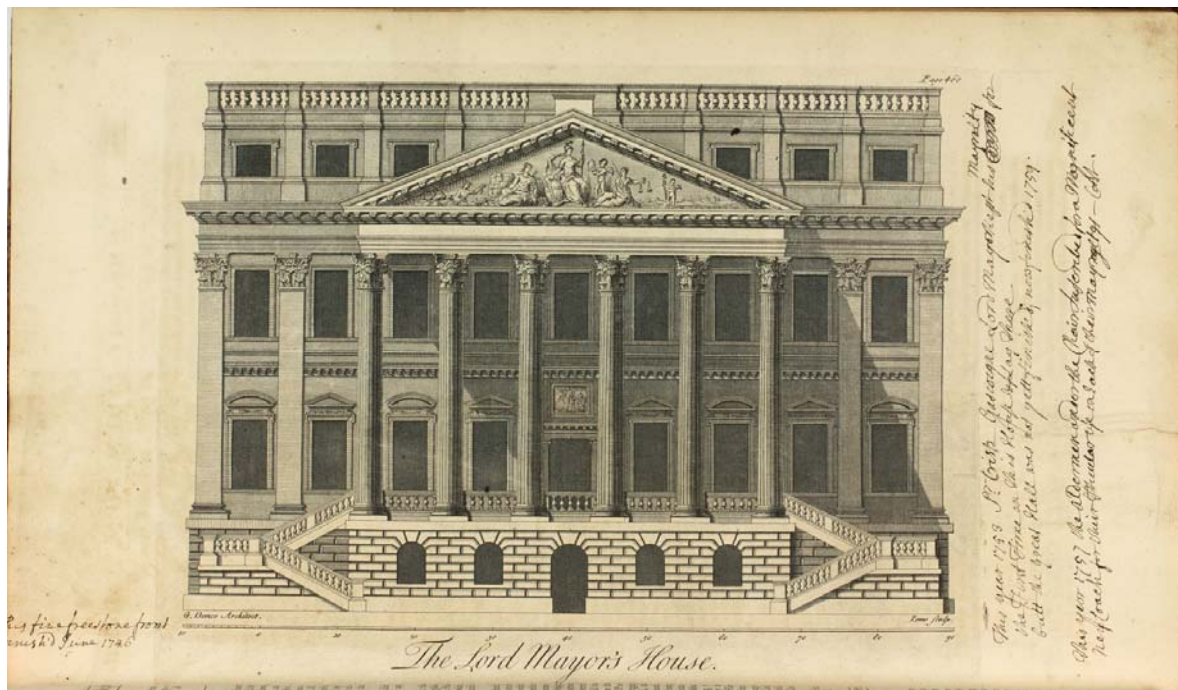
James Green

Librarian

[jgreen@librarycompany.org](mailto:jgreen@librarycompany.org)

(215)546-3181

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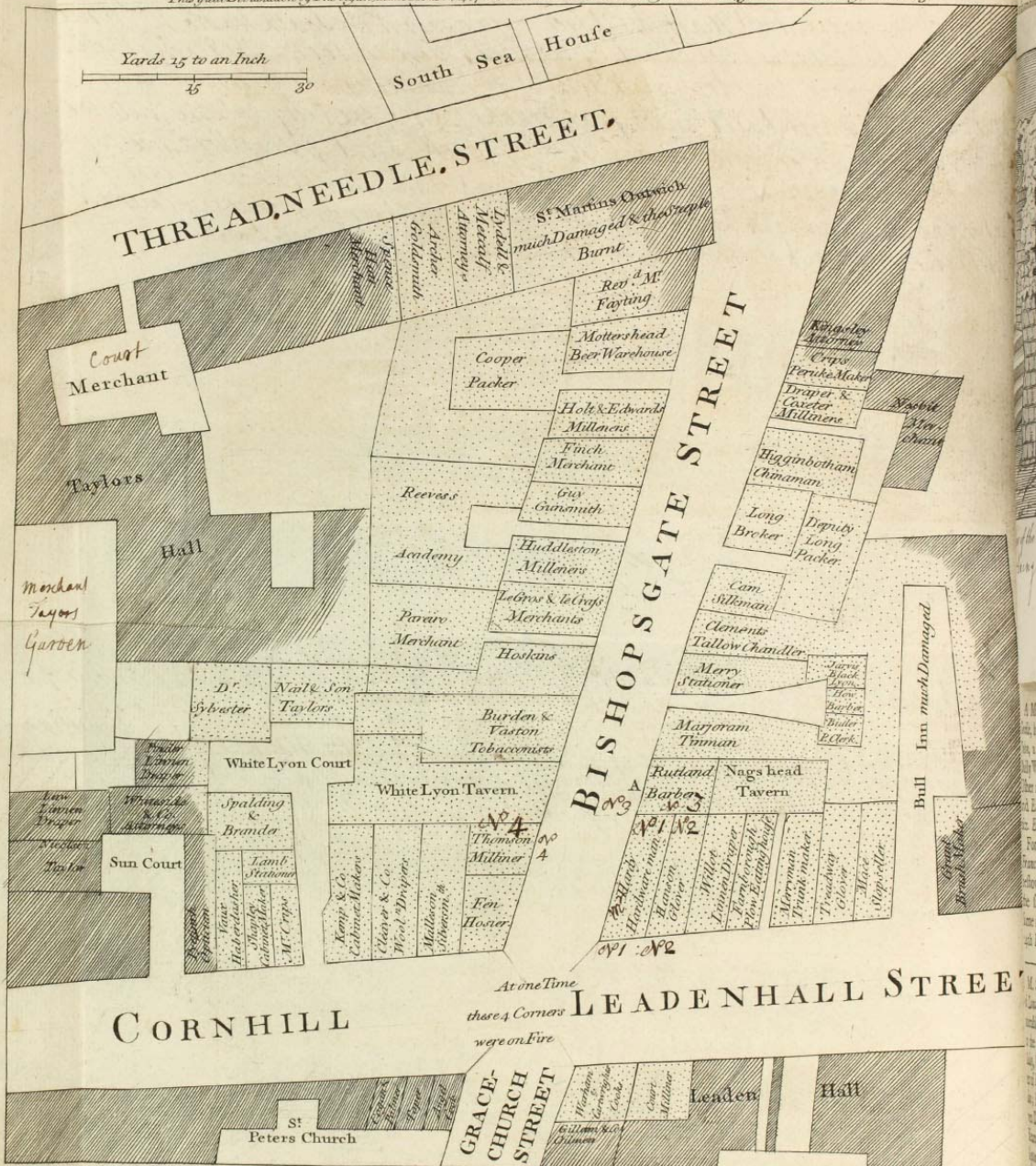
“The Lord Mayor’s House.” Annotated plate opposite p. 460, in Peter Collinson’s copy of William Maitland, *History of London* (London, 1739).



“Bishops-Gate.” Annotated illustration on p. 15, in Peter Collinson’s copy of William Maitland, *History of London* (London, 1739).

APLAN of all the HOUSES destroyed and damaged by the GREAT FIRE which began in BISHOPSGATE STR on Thursday Nov. 7. 1765.

This great Devastation by Fire began in the House (S) of M<sup>r</sup> Rutland Peruke Maker, & Consumed 49 Houses & Damaged about 15.



*N<sup>o</sup> 1. M<sup>r</sup> Rutland's Houſe was planked over, very ancient, left by the great Fire, anno 1666. It projected over the ſpace from Story to Story, many feet, as moſt old Houſes of that age did, which on cumbersome Benches in the Street, the Houſes to right & left was of the ſame old planked Brick Building, under this Houſe was one Vault with four Arched Roofs which may have been appurtenances to the Church adjoining.*

*N<sup>o</sup> 2. Under M<sup>r</sup> Rutland's Houſe was the ancient Church of S<sup>t</sup> Peters of two Sples, beſt dedicated by the King named, the Walls of Chalk & Arches of Stone, what is ſingularly not eaſily accounted for, that the ground is abundantly raiſed, to the whole Length of the Church, or that the people went down ſteps a Story to their Devotion, which is unlikely, as Opus was not ſcarce at the time it was built.*

*N<sup>o</sup> 3. Under M<sup>r</sup> Rutland's Houſe a large Stone Vault had Joyned to the back of this Church - probably might have been ſome other uſe.*

"A Plan of All the Houses destroyed and damaged by the Great Fire." Annotated plate opposite p. 445, in Peter Collinson's copy of William Maitland, *History of London* (London, 1739).