

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.

*.*The attention of scientific men is called to the advantages of the correspondence columns of SCIENCE for placing promptly on record brief preliminary notices of their investigations. Twenty copies of the number containing his communication will be furnished free to any correspondent on request.

The editor will be glad to publish any queries consonant with the character of the journal.

Correspondents are requested to be as brief as possible. The writer's name is in all cases required as proof of good faith.

A folk-lore and dialect society.

YOUR editorial comment on the proposition to found a folk-lore and dialect society in this country is, in my opinion, exceedingly opportune. When the American historical association was organized a few years ago, your correspondent and Prof. H. B. Adams exchanged views on the feasibility of establishing such a society as auxiliary to the work of the association. The plan, however, fell to the ground, until, a few weeks ago, a gathering of scholars interested particularly in American folk-lore met at Cambridge, Mass., and formed the nucleus of a promising society for its investigation. The invaluable work accomplished by the English dialect society, and by such publications as *Melusine* in France and Germany, shows what intelligent effort can do in this direction to save from oblivion the relics, linguistic and superstitious, of the past. All philologists know that the study of dialects — dialectology — is of extreme importance to the scientific linguist; for in the dialects are often found archaic pronunciations, idioms, usages, which point to a more ancient time than the pronunciations, idioms, and usages prevalent among those who speak the standard tongue. In this manner, dialect studies in modern Greek, modern Italian, Spanish, and German have contributed abundantly to the explanation of phenomena in those languages otherwise inexplicable. In this country, where dialects were supposed to be non-existent, or to have been obliterated by the levelling influence of the common school, they are really found, on closer inspection, to abound. Noticing this many years ago, the subscriber contributed to the *Baltimore journal of philology* (iii. No. 2) a paper on 'The Creole [negro] patois of Louisiana,' which was part of a plan to embrace studies in 'Greaser Spanish' (Texas, New Mexico, California), 'The Hoosier dialect of the middle states,' 'The cracker dialect of Georgia, East Tennessee, and North Carolina' (as outlined by R. B.), 'Pennsylvania Dutch' (after Holdeman), 'New Englandisms,' and 'Negro English.' The first and last only of this series have been as yet, though very imperfectly, executed. The essay on negro English was about fifty pages octavo in length, and was published in full, as a tolerably complete grammar of negro, in *Anglia* (Leipzig, Germany, 1884). A *résumé* of it was read before the American philological association, which met at New Haven in July, 1885; and a brief abstract of the paper appears among its Proceedings for that year. Negro usage abounds with linguistic curiosities, obsolescent idioms, twists and turns descended from the Elizabethan or Jacobin settlers; and along with these goes a world of quaint superstitions, proverbs, charms, 'saws and sayings,' that reveal a peculiarly naïve and old-world turn of mind and imagination. The Society for psychical research ought certainly to investigate this *terre vierge*, rich with the stratified folk-lore of ages, enamelled with flowers of African parentage, replete with scraps of custom and myth which might throw

light on the prehistoric period in the life of nations. A sojourn at the Virginia Springs might open to the attentive folk-lorist of the north, armed with a memorandum-book, stores inexhaustible of southern *mährchen*; for here southern society congregates, conversation is still a fine art, and the long evenings of summer are most provocative of meditative reminiscence. Mr. Gomme's proposed manual for the scientific gathering and classification of all this legendary lore will doubtless prove priceless to such summer sojourners. The south is peculiarly fertile in all the conditions through which the curious beliefs, customs, and narratives you editorially comment upon are handed down from generation to generation; nay, are even generated under our very noses. Let the Folk-lore society and the American dialect society come and gather while the hills are white with harvest. It requires no exceptionally gifted pen to take down what one hears and sees all around one. A series of intelligently articulated circulars, with pregnant hint and clear suggestion, sent out under the auspices of these societies, would doubtless elicit lists of words and descriptions of customs and folk-lore prevalent in particular localities, and these could gradually be elaborated and systematized into a volume. By all means, let these societies go to work without loss of time, and both co-operate to a common end.

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Washington and Lee Univ.,
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The idea of a civil academy.

THE idea of a civil academy at Washington, as developed by Dr. Herbert B. Adams, in Circular of information No. 1, 1887, bureau of education, seems to have met with a varying reception from the public press. Condemned by some journals and highly commended by others, the conspicuous attention which it has attracted is the best proof that it is not a mere Utopian dream.

I believe myself that a civil academy is not merely desirable, but that in the no distant future it will be a necessity. The opinions of many government officials who have held positions of administrative responsibility justify this statement. Only recently a gentleman who has long been prominently connected with the public service expressed the conviction that he would yet see the bulk of the higher offices distributed on the basis of competitive merit, in place of being bestowed as the reward of political labors. However this may be, there can hardly be any doubt that civil-service principles have come to stay; and the significance of this fact in the present connection is that a strong demand is thus created for men thoroughly trained and specially fitted, particularly for higher branches of government work. The sentiment has been well expressed by Col. Carroll D. Wright, whose fifteen years of public administrative experience should entitle his views to considerable weight. In an address recently delivered before the joint session of the American historical and Economic associations at Cambridge, on the study of statistics in colleges, he said, "The extension of civil-service principles must become greater and greater, and the varied demands which will be created by their growth logically become more exacting; so that the possibilities within the application of such principles are therefore not ideal, but practical, in their nature. And these