ONE summer day in 1784 Colonel Nathaniel Ramsay entered the large house at the corner of Third and Lombard Streets in Philadelphia. In the course of his visit Ramsay stepped inside a long, narrow building adjoining and extending behind the house. There his brother-in-law, Charles Willson Peale, revealed a collection of between 30 and 40 portraits of Revolutionary heroes.

The well-known painter had erected his gallery in the summer of 1782 with a view to attracting visitors and thus increasing the number of his patrons. The ingenious Peale had designed a unique building for this purpose. Among other things, it contained the first sky-lighted gallery in America. This feature alone drew visitors to Peale's establishment.¹

Justly proud of his paintings, most of which he had done during the recent struggle for independence, Peale found pleasure in expounding upon them. But Colonel Ramsay's attention was snared by something else in the gallery: a collection of enormous bones which Dr. John Morgan had requested that Peale draw. Ramsay exclaimed that he would have walked 20 miles to see such a display, and he believed that there were probably many others who would do the same.²

Falling on fertile soil, Ramsay's suggestion quickly germinated. Before the end of the year Peale added other "natural curiosities" to his gallery and showed them on an informal basis.³ The first permanent accession to his "museum" was a paddle fish, a gift

⁰The author is a Thomas Jefferson Fellow at the University of Virginia.
²Ibid.
from Professor Robert Patterson of the University of Pennsylvania. But for the next two years the museum idea remained relatively quiescent as Peale devoted his energies more fully to another project that seemed much more lucrative.

An entertainment entrepreneur in London had begun in 1781 the showing of transparencies as "moving pictures." In the autumn of 1784, after adding a new room to his gallery, Peale offered to the American public this new form of entertainment. During a typical two-hour performance a wide variety of large "transparent" pictures would be maneuvered across a stage by a backstage crew. To the accompaniment of appropriate music, dramatic scenes such as the battle between the *Bonhomme Richard* and the *Serapis* were presented by means of the moving stage sets. There was considerable interest in Peale's venture, but it did not prove financially successful. In the summer of 1787 the last of the "moving pictures" were shown.

Meanwhile Peale had revived his languishing museum. Science held a genuine attraction for him. In his diary he once admitted spending several hours one morning observing some "bewitching" beetles in a meadow, almost totally oblivious to the passage of time. And many years later, having been shown the water-filled hole in which he expected to find the bones of a mammoth, he said that the pleasure of the sight "almost tempted me to strip off my clothes and dive to the bottom and try to feel for bones."

Advertising in Philadelphia papers on July 18, 1786, Peale announced that his house would be a "Repository for Natural Curiosities." He promised that the donors of museum pieces would be identified by inscriptions.

In earnest now about the infant enterprise, Peale took his gun and his paints and undertook a series of painting tours throughout the South. When not engaged in painting, he shot and stuffed birds to place in his museum. The money that he received for his
painting enabled him to move ahead with ambitious plans for the museum.  

One of the chief problems Peale faced was the preparation of specimens. Taxidermy was something new to Philadelphia, but, undaunted, Peale purchased a few books on the subject and began to experiment. His first efforts met with mixed results. A French angora cat donated by Benjamin Franklin had to be discarded, but the golden pheasants given Peale by George Washington were mounted successfully. After losing quite a number of his first specimens to “dermestes and moths,” Peale experimented with new materials for the treatment of stuffed animals, finally achieving good results with arsenic and alum. He wrote at this time that he had not yet been able to get any “large wild beasts,” but then noted that it was “necessary it should be so, as I have been practicing on the smaller to gain knowledge of the business.” Eventually Peale devised a most unique method of handling many of his specimens. Taking advantage of his ability as a sculptor, he modeled bodies on which the skins were placed, going so far as to carve even the semblance of muscles, thus giving the specimens an exceptionally lifelike appearance.

By the early 1790's accessions to the museum had increased to the point where there was not room enough to accommodate everything. Both then and later, friends such as Thomas Jefferson not only showed an interest in the museum and made suggestions for its improvement but also contributed valuable specimens to it. During his presidency, Jefferson made Peale’s institution a government depository for such materials as the collections of the Lewis and Clark expedition. When the reputation of the museum became international, duplicates were exchanged with European institutions, including the British Museum, the Museum d’Histoire Naturelle, and the Royal Society of Sweden.
Generally considered to be America's first natural history museum, Peale's Museum was proving to be a remarkable success by the time it was barely ten years old. President Washington purchased the first four season's tickets in 1794; and Vice-President John Adams was the next subscriber. Philadelphia was proud of its museum and enthusiastically supported it.

Peale could not have picked a better city to serve as the cradle for this enterprise. In addition to being the country's largest city, Philadelphia was widely regarded as its intellectual and cultural center as well. Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh had pointed out that Philadelphia was the main port of entry in America for the Enlightenment. Here was the finest American theater. Here, too, William Bartram developed his Botanical Garden, which, like the museum, was well-known among European naturalists.

The museum benefited from the fact that entertainment, or anything related to it, was not as suspect in Philadelphia as in other parts of the nation, where many low-church Protestants reacted against all forms of popular entertainment. Nevertheless, even in Philadelphia, Washington had attended plays in 1787 that were announced as concerts because of a prohibition against theatrical performances and Peale carefully disguised as education what amusement the museum afforded.

Not to be overlooked is the fact the American Philosophical Society was located in Philadelphia. This group had a great influence on the museum and was for some time virtually its sponsor. Peale's election to the Society on July 21, 1786, came at the

17 The claims of other institutions to this distinction have been carefully discussed by George Gaylord Simpson in "The First Natural History Museum in America," Science, XC (September 18, 1942), 261-263. He has concluded that Peale's was indeed the first public natural history museum in the country.
18 Although Peale designated his museum the "Philadelphia Museum" through most of its history and occasionally used other names, to the people of Philadelphia it was always "Peale's Museum."
20 Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, Rebels and Gentlemen: Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin (New York, 1942), 363.
time when he was launching his museum project.23 He became one of the most faithful members of the organization. In January of 1788 he was chosen curator and thereafter repeatedly reelected.24

Members of the Society influenced Peale to set up his museum on a systematic basis, with specimens arranged from the lowest forms to man, according to the Linnaean classification.25 Valuable help in the work of classification was given Peale by the French naturalist A. M. F. J. Beauvois, who also wrote the French edition of the museum's catalogue during his visit to America when the museum was becoming well established.26 The Philosophical Society also encouraged Peale to adhere to "serious purpose" in his undertaking, steering him away from the temptation to cheap showmanship.27

Because of his reputation as a painter and his connection with the museum, Peale had many friends among the young nation's leaders, whether in government, the arts, or the sciences. Friendships with David Rittenhouse, Thomas Paine, Joel Barlow, Robert Fulton, and William Thornton, to name but a few, meant a great deal to him and, of course, had an important effect on his thinking and on the directions which the museum took.

Peale probably treasured his association with Jefferson above all. They worked together as members of the Philosophical Society. For three decades they also kept up a steady correspondence on a great variety of topics. Their relationship was not at all one-sided either. While Jefferson influenced Peale's thinking, the artist contributed to Jefferson's deeper appreciation of painting.28 Some of Peale's delight with Jefferson shows through in this comment which he made about a "very elegant" dinner at the White House during Jefferson's administration: "Not a single toast was given or called for, or politics touched on, but sub-

23 "Early Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge: Compiled by one of the Secretaries from the Manuscript Minutes of Its Meetings from 1744 to 1838," Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, XXIX (January, 1855), 143-144. 24 Ibid., 158.
jects of natural history, and improvements of the conveniences of life."

In September of 1794 the American Philosophical Society granted Peale the use of its hall on Fifth Street below Chestnut. A great boon to the museum, the new quarters permitted a better arrangement of the specimens in more spacious rooms. But the museum continued to expand; in just a few more years another move was necessary. Fortunately, the Pennsylvania Assembly vacated the State House (Independence Hall), and in the spring of 1802 Peale transferred most of his specimens to that building, which was ideal for his purposes.

By this time the museum had made Peale financially independent. Receipts for the year 1802 came to nearly $4,000. There were, of course, large expenditures, but a healthy margin of profit was being realized. Peale's biographer has pointed out that "the museum's first and sustaining impulse was economic" and that the educational ideal was secondary, sincere though Peale may have been in emphasizing the latter aspect. It would be unfair, however, to stress too much the profit motive in connection with his museum. He had high ideals, envisioning for his institution nothing less than "a world in miniature."

After visiting Peale's museum in the late 1780's, the Reverend Manasseh Cutler wrote that the animals had reminded him of Noah's ark, but he could "hardly conceive that even Noah could have boasted of a better collection." Had Charles Willson Peale read that comment he would have been most pleased, for from the very conception of his museum project he had kept before him the goal of "a world in miniature." He set for himself the aim of gathering under the roof of his museum "specimens of

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31 Ibid., 946.
every branch of nature from every part of the world.” In keeping with his goal of comprehensiveness, the idealistic curator included in time not only animals but also plants, minerals, and soil samples. He intended that it should be said of his institution, as someone had said of the Bologna Museum, that “all nature laid [sic] before us at a view.”

One of Peale’s fondest wishes, and one that might have perpetuated the museum to the present day, if realized, was that the museum be nationalized. In the introduction to a series of lectures which he delivered, Peale argued that as the museum was a national good it ought also to become a national concern. A favorite point which he raised in support of the idea of a national museum was its obvious value as a center where foreign visitors might become thoroughly acquainted with the natural history of the United States.

Associated with the proposal that his museum be made a national museum, supported by government subsidy, was Peale’s hope that it might eventually become the center of a national university.

The philosophical undergirding of the museum is of impelling interest and must be considered if one is to appreciate Peale’s work fully. From early manhood Peale had trusted in Reason, the god of the Enlightenment. This, of course, had led him to revere science. His thinking reflected the influence of Newtonianism, then still overshadowing the scientific community. Salient in the philosophy to which Peale subscribed was the idea of order in the natural world, and, indeed, in the universe. He could agree with the poetic sentiment of Alexander Pope, who wrote that “Order is Heav’n’s first law.”

Philosophers of the period often expressed this quality of order through the medium of the “Great Chain of Being” metaphor, which compared all things in the universe, from pebbles to men.

Sellers, Artist of the Revolution, 249.
Charles Willson Peale, Introduction to a Course of Lectures on Natural History (Philadelphia, 1800), 12.
Ibid., 24.
to links in a great chain, "everything in its place, everything with its function." Contemplating such a scene, Peale himself exclaimed "how wondrous" and then quoted from James Thomson:

Each shell, each crawling insect, hold a rank
Important in the plan of him who form'd
This scale of beings; holds a rank, which last
Would break the chain and leave behind a gap
Which nature's self would rue.

With such a view of the universe, Peale might be expected to espouse deism, which he did. He concurred in naturalist William Bartram's description of the world as "a glorious apartment of the boundless place of the sovereign creator," and endorsed Thomas Paine's statement that "Creation speaketh an universal language. . . . In fine, do we want to know what God is? Search not the book called the Scriptures . . . but the Scripture called the Creation."

Herbert Morais, in his study of 18th century deism in America, observes that until 1776 deism was but "an aristocratic cult confined to a few intellectuals residing in relatively large towns." By the time that Peale's Museum was well established, though, deism was more widespread and was becoming more militant. Peale envisioned a missionary purpose for his museum which, like Paine's Age of Reason, might bring deism to the masses. "Let philosophy conduct you to the temple of religion," he stated in one of his lectures: "contemplate the objects and productions of Nature as the great and marvelous works of Almighty God."

"In a letter to Jefferson he noted that the observation of nature "elevates the mind to an Admiration and Adoration of the Great Author!"

Obviously, Peale did not convert the masses to deism, and

42 Nye, Cultural Life of the New Nation, 11-12.
44 Herbert Morais, Deism in Eighteenth Century America (New York, 1934), 17.
45 Sellers, Later Life, 111-112.
46 Martin, Thomas Jefferson: Scientist, 117.
47 Some deists were greatly moved by the museum, though. On entering it, the Comte de Volney, for example, exclaimed, "This is the House of God!" See Sellers, Later Life, 246.
Charles Wilson Peale was careful to avoid offending the orthodox Christians who visited the museum. In moments of intense exuberance he longed to call his museum a temple but was always dissuaded.

During the period of its greatest glory, the museum was housed on the second story of Independence Hall. The core of the museum was the "Long Room," which stretched from one end to the other of the Chestnut Street front of the building. Here were featured, in 12-foot glass cases, the outstanding bird collection, along with the original nucleus of the museum, the extensive array of paintings, mostly portraits of eminent Americans.

In the Quadruped Room one might examine specimens of the sloth, the buffalo, the great anteater, the grizzly bear, and many others. A "gruesome" room, according to Peale's grandson, George Escal Sellers, was the Marine Room, where visitors might see lizards, snakes in realistic poses (one charming a stuffed bird), a carefully contrived "South American mermaid" (half fish and half monkey), and other items of interest.

Of greatest interest to Jefferson was the Model Room. It held, in addition to mechanical devices and models (for example, a clothes washer, a dry dock model, and a model of Paine's iron bridge), American Indian and Chinese instruments, minerals, and various historical materials.

Scholars were interested in the library of natural history located over the stairway in the main hall. For years Peale had been bringing together pertinent books for his own use and that of the public. Just off the landing there was a lecture room, where from time to time experts in the various sciences addressed curious audiences.

An enclosure outside the building held a large collection of flowers, as well as a few live animals. Clumsy bears played together, parrots chatted, a monkey showed off an assortment of capers, and an eagle looked on majestically from his cage.48

What the majority of the museum visitors were most interested in seeing, however, was not at Independence Hall. That was the mastodon that Peale himself had exhumed in 1801, amidst widespread public curiosity, from a marl pit on the farm of John Masten in Ulster County, New York. With an eye for profits, Peale left the mastodon in a special room at Philosophical Hall when he moved the rest of his exhibits to Independence Hall, charging a separate fee of fifty cents to see the enormous skeleton. Eventually one of Peale's best-known paintings, a grand and detailed picture of the exhuming operations, was placed behind the mastodon and excited considerable attention itself.\(^4\)

Among the museum exhibits were a few unorthodox specimens like the finger of a murderer, a deformed calf, and so forth. There was a physiognotrace, too, which was used for the drawing of silhouettes. But, for the most part, it was a respectable institution, without many sensational features or lucrative sidelights.

Many advanced techniques were employed by Peale in his museum, some of which, after the decline of the museum, were virtually lost until revived by modern museums in the twentieth century. The ingenious museum master made skillful use, for example, of his artistic abilities in originating the "habitat arrangement." This term has reference to the placing of mountings before painted backgrounds illustrating their natural environment, often with rocks, bushes, and nesting materials added in the foreground.\(^5\) By this means, in the words of Peale, "...the habits of the animals may also be given by showing the nest, hollow, cave, or the particular view of the country from whence they came."\(^6\)

As it reached its zenith, the museum and its curator basked in the sun of wide acclaim—acclaim well deserved, for it was based upon excellence. After a visit to the museum, Mrs. Anne Royal affirmed that the exhibit was "well worth ten times the money"


paid at the ticket office. The museum was the pride of Philadelphia and highly esteemed by the other citizens of Pennsylvania as well. On her first visit to the Quaker City, in 1810, a Moravian sister from Lancaster County most of all wished to see Peale's Museum. The State granted Peale the use of much of Independence Hall and part of its grounds without charge.

Nearing seventy, Peale, highly satisfied with his project, though still hoping for its adoption by the Federal Government, contemplated retirement. With receipts moving toward an annual figure in excess of $8,300, Charles Willson Peale turned over the management of the museum to his son Rubens in 1810 and went into retirement at Belfield, his Germantown farm. Although he kept in touch with museum affairs, it was his intention to avoid interfering with the operation of the institution.

Gradually his garden took the place in his heart formerly occupied by the museum. Soon he was writing to Jefferson that gardening was becoming his favorite occupation. But Peale busied himself with other activities as well. There were experiments with vapor baths, windmills, methods of embalming, velocipedes. He corresponded with Jefferson about methods of converting salt water to fresh water and about improvements in the physiograph. His ingenuity fully unleashed, Peale experimented with false teeth, even fitting himself with a pair.

By 1815 he had tired of agriculture and yearned once again to paint. Despite his failing sight and the fact that he had painted infrequently during the past two decades, Peale did some of his finest work with the brush during the next few years.

In 1816 the museum reached the peak of its prosperity, bringing in receipts totalling nearly $12,000. But Peale was not entirely happy with the course the institution was pursuing. A serpent had crept into his temple. Showmanship was polluting the museum.

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24 Sellers, Later Life, 250.
26 Sellers, Later Life, 282.
27 Flexner, Light of Distant Skies, 103; Martin, Thomas Jefferson: Scientist, 256; Flexner, America's Old Masters, 238.
28 Sellers, Later Life, 293.
29 Ibid., 280.
30 Ibid., 246.
Under Rubens’ direction it had been made more attractive, but also more superficial. The educational ideal held so high by his father was obscured. Programs and lectures popularizing the wonders of science were being used to bring in even more money. Rubens was not investing in solid additions to the museum’s exhibits; instead he featured sensational items such as freaks which brought quick profits.\(^6\)

Observing the altered character of the museum and responding to some public discontent, the State Government began charging the museum an annual rental fee of $400 for the use of Independence Hall. When the City of Philadelphia bought the building in 1816, it raised the rent to $1,200 a year, coming down to $600 after the museum, with receipts nose-diving, operated at a loss for three successive years.\(^6\)

Now the founder of the museum was concerned about its very survival. Previously financially independent, he was beginning to feel the squeeze from vanishing profits. In 1820 the museum brought in less than half of what it had earned four years earlier.\(^6\) As he now began to interfere in museum affairs, trying to restore the old educational slant, Rubens pulled out, leaving his elderly father take over as manager once again in 1822.\(^6\) But there was no turning the tide; the decline continued.

Rubens went to New York to set up his own museum, which survived until the panic of 1837.\(^6\) Another son, Rembrandt, had set up a museum in Baltimore already.\(^6\) And there were still other museums around the country. Their competition was one factor in the decline of the one which they were emulating. But more important as a factor was probably the growing competition from the type of show with which P. T. Barnum was destined to rise to fame and fortune.

When Peale died on February 22, 1827, the museum to which he had remained devoted had only a few more years to live.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) After Peale’s death the museum maintained a tenuous existence, undergoing several moves before its total expiration in 1846. But within a few years after his death it was so altered that it bore little resemblance even
Both he and his museum were children of an age that was no more.

Charles Willson Peale, an "idealist with the manner of a promoter,"68 made a significant contribution to American culture with his museum as well as with his paintings. His was one of the ablest efforts "in the entire Western world to bring natural history to the people."69 He democratized natural history, and, to some extent, science in general, reaching out to artisans and farmers in what was "not a great age of popular science."70

To the museum as it had been conducted by Rubens. From 1846 to 1850 the collections were sold at auction, some going to P. T. Barnum and his associate, Moses Kimball. See Colton, "Peale's Museum," 234; and Scharf and Westcott, History of Philadelphia, I, 948.


69 Flexner, Light of Distant Skies, 100.