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# A Conversation with Philip S. Klein

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Philip S. Klein has been “doing history” for more than six decades. An Allentown native who grew up in Lancaster, studied at Franklin & Marshall College and the University of Pennsylvania, and taught for three decades at Penn State, Klein has been among the most zealous and productive advocates of Pennsylvania history. His energies, moreover, have frequently channeled through organizations devoted to the preservation of Pennsylvania documents and material culture, and to the dissemination of knowledge about the Keystone State. Klein is perhaps best known nationally for his authoritative biography of Pennsylvania’s only President, James Buchanan. His synoptic history of Pennsylvania, co-authored with Ari Hoogenboom, continues to be read by thousands of high school and college students each year.


The aura of ineluctability evoked by a career spent in Pennsylvania and dedicated to Pennsylvania history must be tempered by a simple fact: Philip Klein’s passion as a young man was not history, but rather, conflict resolution. As he relates in the interview which follows, Klein was profoundly affected by World War I. He was determined to use his talent to help prevent a repetition. This was not merely an idle daydream. After college and a stint teaching high school in central Pennsylvania, Klein matriculated in a law/international relations program at the University of Chicago. Only the depression and the decline of the League of Nations, which he hoped to serve as an legal specialist, pointed him in other directions for his life’s work.

Pennsylvania history is richer for the loss of a lawyer.

Philip Klein’s contributions to the history of his native state can in part be counted on the pages of a long resume. They include authorship of dozens of books, pamphlets, scholarly articles, book reviews and popular lectures. Klein’s first substantial publication was an article on “Early Lancaster County Politics,” which appeared in *Pennsylvania History* in 1936. His most recent scholarly effort was a paper delivered in 1988 at the annual meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, in which he examined trends in writings on Pennsylvania History. His favorite themes have included the importance of local history, politics in the Keystone State before the Civil War, and James Buchanan. Klein’s book, *President James Buchanan*, published in 1962, earned respect and praise from his peers, even if its favorable interpretation of the nation’s fifteenth president did not persuade many readers.

Scholarly opinion of Buchanan has not changed significantly since 1962,

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and neither has Klein, at least on this subject, as the transcript below will show. Klein has been cheered, however, by the Buchanan's biography's influence on some students and on the writer John Updike, whose 1974 play, *Buchanan Dying*, drew its inspiration from Klein's work. In the preface to *Buchanan Dying* Updike effusively praised Klein's writing and the substance of his argument. On Philip and Dorothy Klein's bookshelf in State College stands a copy of *Buchanan Dying*, with Updike's personal inscription to Philip Klein: "With hopes that he will be at least amused at this strange fruit of his and my researches, with admiration and gratitude."

Philip Klein gravitated to the study of James Buchanan as a natural alternative to work for the League of Nations. Buchanan was a tangible presence during Klein's childhood. As a boy, he romped with his brothers and friends on the Buchanan estate, Wheatland. He attended the college of which Buchanan was a patron. Klein, moreover, fervently sympathized with Buchanan's attempts to prevent or at least forestall a bloody civil war.

As a graduate history student at Penn, Klein fell under the influence and perhaps the spell of Roy F. Nichols, whose fascination with local history, Pennsylvania politics, and James Buchanan meshed with Klein's own. If we must look to his father, long-time Franklin & Marshall College history professor H.M.J. Klein, as the taproot of Philip Klein's historical mindedness, it was Nichols who, more than anyone, channeled Klein's energies into a fruitful commitment. In Roy Nichols Klein encountered a model: A vivid lecturer, exacting researcher, prolific author, and, not least, tireless promoter of history. Nichols's behaviorist outlook, which emphasized the connectedness of local and regional activity to national development, also influenced his protege. Although Philip Klein was never as intensively interested in social science theory as his mentor, Nichols's commitment to a grassroots understanding of political behavior clearly shaped the younger man's historical vision. What Klein wrote in a 1971 tribute to Nichols is as good a statement of his own credo as can be found. Students of Roy Nichols's work, Klein wrote, "will soon be persuaded that neither national nor state history is more important or significant than the other; but that each is tied tightly to the other in a complex, shifting relationship of cultural federalisms—the ever-present but rarely noticed body of peculiar regional attitudes which influence political behavior."

Philip Klein's work carried the credo into print, its influence enhanced by a crisp prose style. Klein's evocation of Pennsylvania politics in the early Jacksonian period as akin to "sport," which captures the vibrancy and crudeness of much of the Jacksonian political scene, is a case in point. Election campaigns, he wrote in *Pennsylvania Politics: A Game Without Rules*, "gave people a chance to take sides, to shout and swear, to cheer and jump up and down, to get drunk and fight."

Klein's pen could achieve other effects as well, the kind which gained the notice of John Updike as he prepared his own, fictional account of Buchanan's ordeal in the White House. In his Prologue to *President James Buchanan*, Klein stole a leaf from the novelist by imagining the aging ex-President at Wheatland just before the battle of Gettysburg, wondering if the Confederate troops under General Robert E. Lee would cross the Susquehanna River and despoil Buchanan's beloved Lancaster County. Might the Squire of Wheatland have been a target of the rebels' wrath? As Klein portrays the scene, scared citizens fled east towards Lancaster until word finally arrived that Southern troops had been halted by the burning of the Columbia-Wrightsville bridge.

From the Prologue: "Nearly half a century before, while trying to save that bridge in a law court, (Buchanan) had lost Ann Coleman. . . . Through all his later years, eschewing domesticity for politics, he had labored to keep strong the bridge of understanding and mutual regard between people of the North and the South. The bridge was burning now, ruined as completely as his own life's work."

Were Philip Klein simply a fine writer, his reputation as a leading Pennsylvania historian would be safe. But he has earned the nickname "Mr. Pennsylvania History" through more than his publications. As Penn State Klein supervised several dozen master's theses and doctoral dissertations, many of them on Pennsylvania subjects. His course on Pennsylvania History turned more than one reluctant student into a buff. Virtually every major organization devoted to the study of Pennsylvania history has borne Klein's imprint, from the Centre County Historical Society to the Historical Foundation of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Historical Association, of which Klein is a charter member and ex-President. In his broad-ranging commitments, and his zestful approach to issues large and small, Philip Klein has followed in the footsteps of his mentor, Nichols. But as the discussion which follows shows, his work and his views are no mere echo of even so distinguished a historian as Roy Franklin Nichols; Klein's corpus and his eloquent advocacy for history stand impressively on their own.

**Birkner:** We're sitting here in State College on a late fall afternoon in Philip Klein's house to talk about his life and career and some of his memories. I'd like to begin by discussing your early life and education. You're one of the Lancaster Kleins?

**Klein:** Yes.

**Birkner:** Yet you were born in Allentown. How did you get to Lancaster?

**Klein:** At the time of my birth my father was pastor of Zion Reformed Church in Allentown. He was invited to come to Franklin & Marshall College to teach church history, the main kind of history taught there. That was a Reformed

institution. The date of my birth was June 1909. By September of 1909 my father had moved to Lancaster. So I spent six months in Allentown, and that's my birthplace.

**Birkner:** Were you the last of the children of the family?

**Klein:** My father and mother had three children; I was the youngest. There were two other boys. Richard Henry Klein was my oldest brother. He is an attorney, born in 1900, still living and practicing law in Sunbury, Pennsylvania. My brother Frederic was born in 1905 in York, Pennsylvania, because father was then preaching in York. He became a professor of history at Franklin & Marshall College. He died in February 1987.

**Birkner:** You grew up in Lancaster. Could you take us back to Lancaster around the time of World War I? What kind of a community was Lancaster? What kind of a life did you lead as a boy?

**Klein:** I led a life that was largely confined to the families and children of the faculties of the Lancaster Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church and of Franklin & Marshall College. The seminary was right across the street from our house. A block and a half to the west of our house was Franklin & Marshall College, where my father taught, so he was well acquainted with the faculties of both institutions. I had an upbringing amidst an academic community. When my parents would go visiting, I'd go along and play with the kids of the other professors, and got to know the faculty habits, the way they lived and acted and so forth; and this went on, really, throughout my youth. From second grade on I went to Franklin & Marshall Academy, graduated from there in June 1925, and started college in September. I had just turned sixteen. I graduated from F&M in June 1929. So my associations were with the people in the academic community surrounding the seminary, Franklin & Marshall Academy and Franklin and Marshall College. It was not exactly a placid life. As kids always do, we got into our quota of trouble. But nonetheless it was a life in which we were interested in reading and hearing music and enjoying many of the quieter sides of life. We didn't have much in the way of material things, but we certainly enjoyed what we did have.

**Birkner:** Did your father like to have the family around the dinner table at night and talk about the day's activities—or was he so busy that you didn't have a leisurely dinner hour?

**Klein:** My father's mother lived with us from the day he was married until I had graduated from college. She had some effect on the household. It was normal in this house to have three generations sitting around the table eating breakfast, lunch and dinner, with prayer before each meal. That was standard practice. How much influence my grandmother, the matriarch of the family, had, I cannot tell you. I suspect, looking at it from a distance, that she did indeed have influence.

**Birkner:** Were these meals sober affairs, or were they lively?

**Klein:** Oh, they were lively, full of discussion. My eldest brother had left by the

time I was ten years old. He went off to law school in Philadelphia and was not back at the table, except as a guest, from about 1919 on.

**Birkner:** Did he attend F&M?

**Klein:** He attended F&M, and entered the students' army training corps, the SATC in 1917, and was then sent up to Plattsburgh, N.Y., to train for overseas duty. What most affected me in World War I was that one of my very good friends—a colleague of my brother Richard—had gone overseas. He got gassed and killed. Dick Livingston I never will forget. He was one of the nicest guys in the world. I thought, "war: what a stinking thing this is." In a sense, that affected my interest in history, because I thought that studying history was one of the ways you could avoid war—getting people to know the truth about each other. I never forgot it. When we heard that Dick Livingston had been gassed and died, that was a sad day on the 500 block of West James St.

**Birkner:** I assume that the fact that your father taught history must have had some impact on you as well. Did it?

**Klein:** My father got into local politics, and that was discussed around the dinner table. I don't recollect that he talked much about American History, though he talked a lot about World War I. I remember the day the *Lusitania* sank. It was a cold day and we had the gas fire in the grate in the dining room burning, and my father brought in the morning paper and he said, "My God, The *Lusitania* has been sunk. This means war. This means war." That sank in, because what he predicted, happened, and what happened was awful. For a kid eight years old—that kind of thing stuck.

**Birkner:** On this business of politics: This was the Progressive era, and many cities witnessed reform coalitions working against special interests.

**Klein:** In Lancaster, it was the Law and Order Society. Father was a Law and Order Society man.

**Birkner:** The Law and Order Society? Who were they particularly fighting against?

**Klein:** Reverend Twombly, the pastor of the Episcopalian Church in Lancaster, was its head for six or seven years. He got himself in the papers all the time, spying on whorehouses, breaking into beer joints, a little like the lady prohibitionists of an earlier era. He was that kind of guy—he'd go into a place with a hatchet. He made the news all right. And he made people aware that Lancaster wasn't the sweet little town they thought it was. But on the other hand, he made pretty much of a fool of himself and of the society from time to time.

**Birkner:** Your father was part of that society?

**Klein:** Father was part of that society, but he didn't very much like the methods that Rev. Twombly was using. He thought they were more directed towards sensationalism than conquering the problem.

**Birkner:** Was the local Republican Party divided at that time into factions—between the regulars and the reformers?

**Klein:** Well, as always, from the Civil War right on up, the Republican Party was two parties. There was the old gang and the reformers. And in Lancaster in this period Congressman William Griest was the enemy of the reformers. My father wrote many editorials for the Lancaster *Intelligencer*, the Democratic paper, very much opposed to Mr. Griest as one of the bosses. He was a rich man who owned the traction company and built the Griest building in downtown Lancaster. My father actively engaged in media politicking against Bill Griest. Griest generally picked the city officers, including the mayor. There was local eagerness to get rid of this type of control of the city. Dad was in the middle of that effort, and he helped to put Frank Musser, the reform candidate for Mayor, into office. After that they wanted to run Dad for Congress on the reform ticket. Wisely, he declined.

**Birkner:** Why do you say wisely?

**Klein:** He was not cut out for being a politician. He was a very persuasive gentleman, a very honest gentleman, he had guts. When he served as chairman of the city planning commission he raised Cain about housing for the poor—and he brought all the blacks and poor people down on him because he was condemning the housing. What he was trying to do was to get good housing for them. Within five years they were cheering him because he got rid of the junk and got good housing for them. But in the meantime he had to take it on the chin. But, I think he could not have lived with the kind of politics that existed in Pennsylvania in those years.

**Birkner:** Did that make an impact on you as a young man?

**Klein:** It did.

**Birkner:** How did it shape you, or make you think?

**Klein:** It made me think that the things we were taught in school, about how wonderful the nation was, weren't all true, that it would be wise if we knew more about what our governing people were like. That was reinforced a few years later when I learned that James Buchanan wasn't the worst politician who ever lived. I heard that from a professor at the University of Chicago. And when he discovered that I grew up near James Buchanan's home, he said, "Boy, have you ever been mistaught. You have a lot to learn, young man."

**Birkner:** This professor thought highly or poorly of Buchanan?

**Klein:** He thought highly of him. Along with John Quincy Adams, he thought him one of the best diplomats the United States has ever had. The professor was Frederick L. Schumann, a diplomatic historian at the University of Chicago. He was a responsible scholar—and he's the one who encouraged me to study Buchanan.

**Birkner:** Of course before you do that, you go off to F&M to college. Could you tell us a little of your experiences there? It was obviously a small college. Can you offer some particulars about it?

**Klein:** At the time I went to F&M, most of the professors were pastors. Not all,



*Philip S. Klein, ca. 1927, in the driver's seat of his beloved 1916 Ford.*

but the majority of them. The Board of Trustees was appointed by the church, so it was a church school. They didn't emphasize this, except you had to go to chapel every morning, for a brief ten to fifteen minute service, with prayers, singing a couple of songs, and a brief address by somebody, generally one of the faculty. Then we'd go to classes. The professors were dedicated both to their subject matter and to their students. One of the things that made a lasting impression on me—I'll never forget it—was my philosophy professor, Professor Elijah E. Kresge. He had a son who was two years ahead of me in college, who was the apple of his eye. Early one morning his son crashed his car into a telephone pole, and killed himself. We all knew this. I had an eight o'clock the next morning with Dr. Kresge. I didn't know whether he'd be there or not, but I figured I'd better go. Well, he walked in the door. He said, "We will proceed as usual. If I did not do that, I would not deserve the title Philosopher."

**Birkner:** Was he a good teacher?

**Klein:** He was a very good teacher. He made you think. He didn't answer the questions, he proposed the questions. Then he led you through the various answers that went in different directions.

**Birkner:** Did you take any courses with your father?

**Klein:** I took two courses with him. He was a very good teacher. I wish I had his voice, and I wish I had the reading background he did. The students liked him very much. He was fair with them.

**Birkner:** I take it that he taught more than church history.

**Klein:** He taught twenty-three different courses at F&M. He taught economics,

he taught philosophy, he taught religion, he taught Asian history, he taught modern history. The first thing I taught when I got there, and he was my boss, was Czechoslovakian history.

**Birkner:** Czechoslovakian history?

**Klein:** Remember, the year I got to F&M as a teacher was 1938. Everybody wanted to know about Czechoslovakia. So he came up to me and said, "You have to teach a course on Czechoslovakia."

**Birkner:** Were there resources at F&M to do such a thing?

**Klein:** There was a textbook! (Laughs) Oh, there were books.

**Birkner:** How many people were in typical classes at F&M?

**Klein:** Twenty-five to thirty. Each professor had his own individual classroom, with big maps at the back, a big blackboard in the front. Then there was a door into dad's private office with his own books. He would emerge from his office, go up to the podium, and the first thing he would say would be: "Stonesifer, go to page 233 and see if you can read." He would always have the students stand up and read. Then they'd talk about the paragraphs he had read. He was a great one for making the students stand up and perform amongst their colleagues or in public. He thought this improved their diction. And when their diction was bad, he corrected it.

**Birkner:** You mention that most of the teachers at the time you attended Franklin & Marshall were pastors. Did most of the students expect to go on to either the ministry or teaching? What was the typical range of interest?

**Klein:** The typical range of interest was medicine, law, teaching and the ministry. Those were the big four at the time I was going there.

**Birkner:** Did you know where you were headed?

**Klein:** I took two majors: a major in history and a major in education. I also had about eighteen hours in two or three foreign languages. I suspected that I would go into teaching. I liked the history stuff that I was working with; there was so much of it around the house. And my dad made it interesting for me. A professor of education, P.M. Harbold, was a very fine man who had a contagion for the subject. He made it very human. And I had a very good practice teacher down at the high school. All of them were men I admired. They acted the way I thought a teacher ought to act.

**Birkner:** When you left F&M, did you go on immediately to the University of Chicago?

**Klein:** No, I went right on to teach. I went up to the Dutch Country, to Womelsdorf. The head of the school board was from F&M, a friend of my dad's, and not surprisingly, I got the job, as a social studies teacher in the Womelsdorf High School in Berks County. I taught six different subjects each day.

**Birkner:** Did you live up there?

**Klein:** I lived up there, in a boarding house right across from the school. I didn't have a car. I made \$926 a year, which wasn't bad, especially as I had no place to



spend it. I had to work very hard, teaching World History, Civics, Problems of Democracy, American History, Pennsylvania History. I had to prepare each class each day, just to get ready, because I'd never taught before. Plus grading all the papers.

**Birkner:** How long did you stay there?

**Klein:** One year.

**Birkner:** Why did you leave?

**Klein:** Because I was offered a job teaching English literature at Ephrata, Pennsylvania. It was a little closer to home; the trolley ride wasn't so long. I really left to see what it would be like to teach English Lit. I had started to read some of that and got interested in it. I made \$926 there, too, but the room and board was cheaper. I stayed there for a year, and by the time that year was done, I had saved enough to go to the University of Chicago.

**Birkner:** Why Chicago?

**Klein:** Dad said, get yourself an advanced degree or you'll be there the rest of your life.

**Birkner:** You could have presumably gone to Philadelphia or Pittsburgh or Maryland or somewhere closer than Chicago.

**Klein:** I applied to Princeton, Tufts and Chicago. Princeton didn't accept me. Tufts invited me up for an interview, along with another candidate, but had only one scholarship, and he got it. I'm so very glad he did, because had I gotten it I would have had to study one of the early Egyptian leaders for the rest of my life! At the time I was crushed, but then I got a note that I'd been accepted at the University of Chicago to study in their department of international relations leading to preparation in international law. I'd decided at that time that if I was going to be something, maybe being an international lawyer might be useful to prevent the coming of another war. And so I went to Chicago.

**Birkner:** Did you know anyone in Chicago?

**Klein:** I didn't know a soul.

**Birkner:** What was your experience there?

**Klein:** It was marvelous. Robert Hutchins was president, and Chicago was just beginning to feel its oats. I was pleased to be there, and I got through quite fast. I went through one quarter after another, working my guts out. I took Bernadotte Schmidt's class on the Balkans. He said, "I'm glad to see so many of you in here. I hope you can all read Bulgarian." (Laughs) He then said, "At least you have to read German." Well, I didn't know German, but I said I could read French. He said, "Well, French will have to do." I got through it. The other courses I took, in American Constitutional History, International Law, and American Diplomacy, went very well.

**Birkner:** Who was the most impressive or charismatic professor you had at Chicago?

**Klein:** A tough choice. Quincy Wright, a professor of international law was very,

very good. Marcus Wilson Jernegan, a professor of historical method, impressed us very much. He showed us how questionable everything you read really is, and how hard it is to find something you *know* is truth. I found him quite interesting.

**Birkner:** How did you come to take a course with Jernegan, given that you were in international law at the time?

**Klein:** It was a new M.A. Degree called a Master of Arts in International Affairs. My main adviser was Professor Frederick L. Schumann, and he said, "Well, given your background in history, and your interests, I think you ought to take Quincy Wright in international law, me in diplomacy, Jernegan in Historical Methods, and Andrew Cunningham McLaughlin in American Constitutional History. Then you'll have a balance, and see which comes out the best."

**Birkner:** Did any of these individuals affect the way you looked at history and law that would affect your thinking in later life?

**Klein:** I'd say all of them did. McLaughlin showed me how it's possible for a very famous man to be so biased it's hard to call him a historian. He was so pro-Republican and anti-Democratic in handling the years from 1854 through 1933 that one could think he was a politician rather than a historian. He'd take a controversial subject, talk a bit, and say "Who is to judge, who is to judge?" Well, the answer was, *he* was to judge. But I recognized that he did not give the Democrats or the slaveowners a fair shake. They were just beasts to begin with, not people who had inherited a problem they didn't know how to get rid of, though many of them wished they could get rid of it.

**Birkner:** It would have been interesting to see McLaughlin get into a debate with Ulrich Phillips, who certainly had a different view.

**Klein:** Well, Ulrich Phillips was more moderate. McLaughlin could have argued with some others who'd have given him a tougher time. But that's one thing I learned: to be an eminent historian did not mean you were necessarily without bias. I think from Jernegan I learned a healthy skepticism of everything that is in writing. From Quincy Wright I learned that international law is not a concrete thing but is continually affected in a major way by existing circumstances. There are firm rules, but those rules cannot be enforced by anyone. Since they cannot be enforced, logic does not solve the problem. Tensions exerted by opposing parties resolve the problem. The effort of international lawyers is to make it very embarrassing for those who choose the wrong way to act—hold them up to public scorn. But what can you do with international law unless you have an army to enforce it? So I found international law something I eagerly bought. I thought the ideas were exactly right, and that its rules should be enforceable. And I hoped to join the League of Nations's legal staff. But I couldn't. The League collapsed in 1933.

**Birkner:** Given your level of satisfaction at Chicago with both the subject you were studying and the instruction you were getting, why didn't you stay on and become an international lawyer?

**Klein:** Because in 1933 there was absolutely no work for me.

**Birkner:** Roosevelt was an internationalist, though. Wouldn't there have been an opportunity to work for the government?

**Klein:** I did not have that much ingenuity, or any connections. I was in correspondence with Paul Selsam of Penn State, librarian of the League, and he said, "there's nothing at the League of Nations for what you're thinking about. You'd better go elsewhere." So I stayed at home for a year, and did teaching at the local high schools as a substitute. This was after I had my degree in hand. I also studied German, and wrote to the University of Pennsylvania. Both Roy F. Nichols and St. George L. Sioussat were there, and both were working on James Buchanan. I said I had worked under Schumann and had done a thesis on Buchanan. They said, "send it on," and I did that. They said, "we'll be interested in having you come down to Penn next year as a graduate student, if you want to follow this line." I applied for a scholarship in history and that gave me tuition. So I went to Penn. Herman V. Ames was chairman of the department. Sioussat helped me pick the courses for my program.

**Birkner:** Describe the environment in the seminars at Penn and the students. What kind of experience did you have there?

**Klein:** Penn was a place it took a while to get used to. The history department was a kind of city social club, and quite inbred. Ames was in Constitutional history. He gave a beautifully organized course. Each day he would put up a detailed outline on the board and talk through that. Soon it became apparent that the same outline had been used for twenty-five years. Ames was not an original man, or an inspiring man, but he was thoroughly organized. So you learned material you had never known before, with everything in its proper place. Conyers Read, a Professor of English History, was inspiring. Conyers had his seminar students periodically out to his nice home outside Philadelphia. He got to know the students that way. Nichols was a person who was truly inspiring because, first, he was a performer in class. I was an assistant and watched him teach. He would engage the students' interest, and hold them in suspense. He would walk around the large platform acting out the talk and mannerisms of the historical figures he was discussing. He was Stephen A. Douglas now, he was (Charles) Sumner at another time.

**Birkner:** Did it work?

**Klein:** It worked very well. I recall one occasion when he brought his large class to such a high state of involvement that at the end of his performance someone threw a nickel or a quarter up onto the podium. It was a big room with over 300 students in it. Suddenly the coins were thrown all over the dais.

**Birkner:** And how did he respond?

**Klein:** Oh, he picked them up! He hugely enjoyed the tribute. The class was laughing and cheering. (Laughs) This was a rare and delightful occasion.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Dr. Arthur Cecil Bining, for whom I was the student assistant for a year,

was quiet, sedate, and undemonstrative. His classes were usually very sedate except occasionally, in winter, when some of the men students would come in wearing raccoon coats. Walking down the main aisle, they would open up their coats wearing nothing but shorts or pajamas underneath. The class would break out laughing, but Dr. Bining took no notice and continued to lecture as if nothing had happened. This was his character, as another story, involving me, suggests. I once distinguished myself by staying out late and drinking a little too much and coming in to class in the morning with something of a hangover. I reached for the door just as he was pulling on it from the other side, and I fell flat on my face. (Laughs)

**Birkner:** That was a memorable experience! Did he look down on you for that?

**Klein:** He didn't do anything except go to the platform and start lecturing. Later, in 1949, I co-authored a History of the United States with him for Scribners.

**Birkner:** Let me ask you about your colleagues at Penn. Were they helpful in terms of your growth as a student of history?

**Klein:** Very much so. The students I came to know best were those who shared seminars and whose interests were similar to mine. Many of them, like me, became involved in doctoral theses under Nichols, developing a detailed political history of Pennsylvania from 1740 to 1848. Among these were Theodore Thayer, Robert Brunhouse, Harry Tinckom and Sanford Higginbotham. I saw a lot of Richard Heindel, later President of Wagner College and later administrative director of Penn State's Middletown Campus. I knew Joe Mathews fairly well. He later headed the history department at Emory University. Also John Munroe, who went to the University of Delaware, and Edwin Bronner, who became librarian at Haverford, and Vic Johnson, for many years head of the History Department of Muhlenberg College. These were friends I enjoyed knowing as graduate students at Penn, and whom I usually sought out at the various state and national history conventions. Indeed, shortly after I returned to Penn State from military service, Joe Mathews asked whether I would be interested in taking responsibility for shaping the graduate program at Emory. It was a tempting offer, but my wife and I decided that we would prefer to raise our young son in Pennsylvania rather than in Georgia in the 1950s. So I turned it down. Emory took a historian much better qualified for that job—Bell I. Wiley, who more than fulfilled their anticipations.

**Birkner:** Did you take a seminar with Roy Nichols?

**Klein:** My recollection is that I never had a seminar with him. My seminars in the 1820–1860 time period of American history were with Sioussat. His major emphasis in seminar work was on bibliography. I also had a seminar with Lingelbach in European History. He'd fall asleep when we were reading our papers. It's a tough thing to say, but it's true. (Laughs.)

**Birkner:** It's less important that you remember taking a particular course with

Nichols than that you offer some sense of your relationship with Nichols and how it evolved.

**Klein:** Well, he assigned me work to do, and when he was doing *The Disruption of American Democracy*, I spent a lot of time going through manuscript collections making notes which I then turned over to him. It was busywork that he didn't have time to do.

**Birkner:** Was this at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania or elsewhere?

**Klein:** Sometimes it was just in my own room. He had great reams of xerox and he'd say, I want the data pulled out of these rolls; I have many others that are more important that I must look at. So I did that kind of work for him. It went on for a couple of years.

**Birkner:** Was Nichols a particular influence on you?

**Klein:** I'd say he was the main one. He had the quality, the ability to set up a strategy that links a lot of small things together; that helps to translate personal actions into the evidence sustaining a generalization. He was a master of that. He'd offer five or ten zestful examples to prove a point. But the important thing was the point. This is perhaps the wrong way for a historian to work; but he gathered material from all over not only to prove a point, but also to disprove it. Then he came out with conclusions. He made it so interesting. That certainly influenced me. I thought there was something to the idea that if you cannot engage your public you might as well forget being a historian, because people aren't going to read something if it isn't interesting.

**Birkner:** One of things that has intrigued me in looking at your work is that it follows very much out of Nichols's conception of the way politics operates.<sup>2</sup> That is, Nichols focuses on ins versus outs, on politics as a hardball contest. Your first book, *Pennsylvania Politics: A Game Without Rules*, fits this mold. Indeed, it's similar to the kind of work Richard McCormick did for New Jersey and John Monroe did for Delaware. Did Nichols try to mold you? How did you embrace this world view?

**Klein:** I think Nichols had a lot to do with my thinking. As for what part of him grabbed my interest, that's a harder task. But I admired him very much. In his lecture courses, instead of taking exams, we wrote papers. He invited this, and he called me in to talk about some of my responses and said he thought they were useful. He said they took his ideas a step further than he had thought about going. So we had some agreement on the way you look at things. He was a combination of a prodigious scholar and a very ordinary pleasant gentleman. He used to take his students to the Philadelphia Opera to hear Stowkowski and the Symphony Orchestra. He had me down two or three times. He liked to get to know his students. And I was not the only one. We all got to know him fairly well. It was a revelation to me that a great scholar could be so human.

**Birkner:** Was it a natural for you to do a dissertation on Pennsylvania politics?

**Klein:** I did it primarily because I wished to start working on James Buchanan. I

had already decided when I went to Penn that I was going to work on James Buchanan, find out more about him. I'd already done the diplomatic study. I said, "OK, the main thing about James Buchanan is politics. Let's find out how it started." So I picked him up from his first political triumph in 1817 when he entered the Pennsylvania General Assembly and I wound it up in 1832, because that's when he was sent to Russia. Why did I pick those two dates? You have to stop somewhere, and this seemed a logical place to stop.

**Birkner:** Your focus was not Buchanan *per se*, but Pennsylvania politics.

**Klein:** That's right. But the reason I was interested in the politics of Pennsylvania was to see how this young man who became President got into it and wound up being a fairly distinguished politician who was proposed for Vice-President in 1832.

**Birkner:** You're saying that to understand the man you have to understand his milieu.

**Klein:** That's why I wrote the thesis that way. I talked to Nichols and he said, "That sounds like a good idea. You can't write a biography if you're still wet behind the ears."

**Birkner:** I recently came across a publication by Nichols with a blurb indicating that he was working on a biography of Buchanan. What about that?

**Klein:** I'm not sure exactly what happened, because I was in the service when this was developing. I thought I would go in that direction and work it out with Professor Nichols. If he was going to do a biography of Buchanan, obviously I wouldn't. But I could do something with Buchanan that Nichols wasn't going to do in a biography.

**Birkner:** He never discouraged you?

**Klein:** He never discouraged me. And I don't know what he did during the war years, but he was concentrating on the presidential years at that time. I assumed he was going to go on back, before the 1850s. I don't think I have the correspondence anymore, but I think we did have a confab on it. He said, "I don't think I'm going to do a biography, and I think you ought to go ahead and do it. It's going to take five or ten years to do it, and I haven't got that much time left."

**Birkner:** By the time you were leaving Penn, with your dissertation completed, you had a pretty good sense that you were going to do a biography of Buchanan.

**Klein:** I had that in mind as a probability—not a certainty.

**Birkner:** Did you go immediately to Franklin & Marshall College after Penn?

**Klein:** Yes.

**Birkner:** Was this something you had mixed feelings about, or were you happy about it?

**Klein:** I was happy about it for two reasons. My other alternative would have been to go to Kansas, and learn about the Kansas-Nebraska business first hand. But being in Lancaster gave me the opportunity to rework the thesis, and go to



*The Franklin & Marshall College History Department, 1938-1941. From left, Frederic Klein, H.M.J. Klein, Philip S. Klein.*

the places I had to go to get it ready for publication. Penn didn't grant a Ph.D. until three hundred copies of your dissertation were printed and ready for distribution to three hundred universities throughout the country. You paid it out of pocket or you persuaded somebody to publish it for you. I was glad to be at F&M because it gave me a chance to rewrite the thesis for publication by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. It was accepted in 1939 or 1940 and it was published in 1941.<sup>3</sup> If I hadn't gone to Lancaster, I don't know if it ever would have been published.

**Birkner:** Your situation at F&M surely had to rank as one of the most unusual in any recognized college or university department in the country. The department that you joined was a department filled with Kleins. You were teaching with your father and your brother Frederic.

**Klein:** That's right. But I was not invited to come to F&M by my father, who was head of the department. I was invited to come by the President of the College, Dr. John A. Schaeffer. He called me in and said, "We'd like to have you in the department. If your father asked you, it would seem like nepotism. But he has nothing to do with it. I'm going to put you in the history department, if you'll take the job."

**Birkner:** Do you think your father wouldn't have asked you?

**Klein:** I have no way of knowing, but I think he would have thought better of it, because it would have invited a great deal of criticism. But the President had made the offer, and when he said, "You need not worry, your father is not employing you, I am employing you, and I'll take any criticism. I think you have the qualifications." I said, "Under those conditions I'll be glad to come, because I'd rather stay in Pennsylvania. That's where my work is."

**Birkner:** What do you remember most about the three years you spent at F&M?

**Klein:** It was very very enjoyable. I'm sorry I had to leave. I got back into the literary societies. One of their buildings was literally falling apart. I went around and canvassed the merchants and got Mr. Hager and others to promise to put in a new floor, new woodwork, and paint. By the time three years were up, they were really going again. Now they're dead, I believe.

**Birkner:** I understand that one society has been revived this very year.

**Klein:** I wish them well, because that is where people learn to run meetings and to speak.

**Birkner:** How about the teaching itself?

**Klein:** The teaching was always enjoyable. The new liberal arts building had just been dedicated when I became a member of the department. We had a departmental office, with bookshelves, so we could hold senior seminars in the office itself. There was a classroom right next door. That was ideal for teaching. If a student had a question you could run to the office with the books, find the source and come back and say, "here it is." And that was useful. So to answer your question, I liked the F&M duty very much. And in addition to that, I worked very well with my brother.

**Birkner:** Were you and your brother and father active in the Pennsylvania Historical Association?

**Klein:** It started in Bethlehem in a meeting in 1933. My Dad and I went down there. I was just back from the University of Chicago, and I went to see what was going on. I'm one of the charter members. I listened at that time to Dixon Ryan Fox.<sup>4</sup> That was a dramatic and engaging talk that enthused me about state and local history. That was an important meeting for me.

**Birkner:** As you continued your academic career with a break for the armed forces, did you take offices in the Association?

**Klein:** Well, they invited me to give a talk in 1937—one of the first I ever gave.

**Birkner:** Was it on Buchanan?

**Klein:** It was on Wheatland.<sup>5</sup> But I came back from the navy in 1946, and Paul Selsam of Penn State, then secretary of the association, became ill. The PHA needed a new secretary, and so temporarily I was appointed, at Penn State. I served as secretary with Dorothy, my new wife assisting me, for six or seven years.<sup>6</sup>

**Birkner:** You did serve as president of the association?

**Klein:** In the late fifties.<sup>7</sup>

**Birkner:** Were you able to accomplish anything in particular as President of the PHA?

**Klein:** I feel I did not have much talent as an administrator. I don't think I was a good president of the Association, I don't think I was a good chairman of the department at Penn State, I don't think I was a good president of the Pennsylvania Historical Foundation. I did not have the personality to mobilize people and drive them to do things.



**Birkner:** Maybe you judge yourself harder than other people do.

**Klein:** I tried to appoint people who would get the jobs done. The organizations I served didn't collapse. I'm not sure they moved ahead very much, either. I do not think that's where my function properly lay.

**Birkner:** I take it you most enjoyed being a teacher/scholar.

**Klein:** Very much so.

**Birkner:** Let's turn back to a rather fateful decision for you professionally. Despite your satisfaction at F&M, you made a decision to leave. It must not have been entirely easy. Why did you make it?

**Klein:** President Schaeffer died. He was my ace in the hole for anyone who questioned why I was there. Well, he died in 1941, and my father was invited to take his place *pro tem*. By coincidence, Dr. Wayland Dunaway, Professor of Pennsylvania History at Penn State, had just retired. Asa Martin, chairman of the department there, knew that I had published a book on Pennsylvania politics—there weren't that many such people around at the time. And he wrote me a letter asking whether I would be interested in taking over the Pennsylvania History job at Penn State. I said, "You bet I'd be interested. Things are a little awkward around here."

**Birkner:** What kind of salary did you get at Penn State in 1941?

**Klein:** I got exactly what I got at F&M: \$2500. It wasn't too bad.

**Birkner:** You taught how many courses?

**Klein:** Fifteen hours: three courses and five sections. At F&M the load was eighteen, so I thought it was a little easier.

**Birkner:** You were only at Penn State for about a year before the war started. Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

**Klein:** The draft committee in Lancaster was still in charge of me when World War II broke out. And I wrote back to some member, saying, "what do you think I ought to do?" And he wrote back, "I think you had better enlist." So I did. Things were held up because I did not have a proper birth certificate. The birth certificate did not have my name on. It referred simply to a Klein boy baby. It took me six months to get that straightened out.

**Birkner:** You were in the armed forces for about five years. How much of your tour had nothing to do with history?

**Klein:** Two and a half, maybe three years. I was on active duty with the naval air force; my business was running aviation ground school. I was a private pilot. I spent two years down in Trinidad, British West Indies, where I ran ground school for the navy bombers and reconnaissance planes. Then they sent me to Florida, near Jacksonville, at a dive bomber base. I taught ground school there, too. Then I was pulled out to San Francisco to write the history of the western sea frontier under the direction of Professor Robert G. Albion of Princeton. All history Ph.D.s were pulled out of operations in the armed services to write histories,



*Klein as an officer of the U.S. Navy, 1943.*

either of operations or administration. I was assigned naval administration. My specific duty was to write the history of the supply command in the Pacific War. I began in June 1945, just after V-E Day.

**Birkner:** Many of the leading historians of your generation cut their teeth writing history in the armed forces.

**Klein:** That's right. I ran into a number of my colleagues in San Francisco, doing various jobs, but all employed by the Office of Naval History. I was assigned to the admiral's staff. He was in charge of all supplies—army, navy, air force, marine. All of that was under Admiral R.E. Ingersoll's command.

**Birkner:** Was that experience useful to you?

**Klein:** Very useful. I learned how the high command of the armed services works. I had had contempt for this before. When I found out how it worked, I developed admiration for it. A more responsible group of people I have never run

into. I've never worked in my life with a group of people I more admired than the navy high command personnel.

**Birkner:** Were you the joint-author of a particular history?

**Klein:** I wasn't a joint-author, I was the author of the supply-command history for the Pacific Ocean, theatre of operations.

**Birkner:** Was this an in-house publication?

**Klein:** It was classified.

**Birkner:** Was it book-length?

**Klein:** It was about 750 typed pages.

**Birkner:** So it's probably sitting in Washington somewhere today.

**Klein:** Yes, in the office of Naval History.

**Birkner:** You enjoyed your years in the armed services?

**Klein:** I enjoyed it more in operations than I did doing the writing.

**Birkner:** During a break, you recited from memory a Roy Nichols dictum about writing history. Could you repeat it now?

**Klein:** OK, this is Roy Nichols: "Seek confusion in the past. For where there is confusion there is life, where there's life there is interest, where there's interest there's value, and where there's value there's desire, and where there's desire there's enterprise, and where there's enterprise there's achievement, which in turn seeks new confusion to resolve." (Laughs.)

**Birkner:** I wanted to turn from that philosophy of Roy Nichols to your experiences at Penn State. You came back to State College in 1946. You'd been through a war. You were probably a deeper person. You were a new husband. Thousands of veterans were deciding to take advantage of an opportunity to go to college. I'd like to pick up with any of those points. 1946 would seem to have been a new departure for you and for Penn State, too.

**Klein:** It was for all universities. Whether they were just fresh from the war or not, the returning veterans as students were much more eager to learn than the earlier group of students. They were older by several years, they knew they had to get their lives in order, and they worked hard. The professors had to work pretty hard, too. These students were intelligent people putting their full time into it. They were a joy to teach except for one thing: You did not get time to get acquainted with them as persons. I came back from the service and got to Penn State the first week of March 1946. The second week of March I was in the classroom. I walked up four flights of stairs to a classroom that held four hundred people. It was full, and I had to teach these people American history. And they were an eager class. But I must say, the grading was very difficult. I had no readers, and you could not really test them on the basis of true and false.

**Birkner:** So how did it work out?

**Klein:** I gave essay exams and read the damn things.

**Birkner:** With four hundred students in a class?

**Klein:** You bet. But short responses to my questions, expressed in sentence form—not check marks.

**Birkner:** And you taught other classes?

**Klein:** I taught other courses; that was one of four. But that was the big one. The other courses were either advanced undergraduate courses or graduate courses, with twenty to thirty in each class, so it wasn't so bad. But this one was made out of desperation. The students were there, but they didn't have enough professors.

**Birkner:** Did you feel you would be a Penn State professor for your career?

**Klein:** I wasn't sure, but I was treated well. The year I came it had just been decided that the department would become a separate department. During the war, Paul Selsam had a good deal to do with this, because he was a scholar. He introduced the idea of graduate work. And they were hiring new professors with graduate degrees who were not from Penn State. This was a departure. They started introducing graduate courses slowly into the curriculum. By 1946 a new Department of History existed. The next twenty years were what I would call an empire-building stage for the department. By 1970 it was fairly well known, nationally, as a place that produced students who were becoming heads of departments elsewhere, and writing books that were well reviewed. And so we were beginning to feel our oats. And I was in on that. We got a good group of new people in there as the old group retired. Warren Hassler was one of them. Bob Murray was one of them. I found it very nice to be in a group that was developing on a statewide scale and as time went on they began to be known on a national scale. That made you feel a little bit decent about yourself.

**Birkner:** And your students?

**Klein:** I had 39 masters' students in my years at Penn State. Four of them had their essays published, which is not common for masters' essays. Of the doctoral students, I had ten or eleven of them in the course of my career. Of those, four had their theses published into very reputable books. Merritt Roe Smith of MIT started his prize-winning study of in my seminar.

**Birkner:** He did his work under you? On Harper's Ferry and the new technology?<sup>8</sup>

**Klein:** Yes. His MA thesis. His Ph.D. came under the supervision of our new man in the history of technology, but I was co-advisor on his thesis.

**Birkner:** Do you remember your first Ph.D. student?

**Klein:** Yes, John Serff, the head of Social Studies at the high school here, did his thesis on James A. Beaver. It was a very good thesis. He chose that topic because we had just discovered the Governor Beaver papers at Bellefonte. Since we had those papers here and they had never been worked on, I suggested John do it. That was the first real history Ph.D. thesis that I supervised. I did three others, all published, on the subject that Roy Nichols had started: the political history of Pennsylvania since 1740. John Coleman did from 1848 to 1860, Erwin Bradley from 1860 to 1872, and Frank Evans 1872 to 1877.<sup>9</sup>



*Klein examining some of the papers of Governor James Beaver which he helped rescue and deposit in Special Collections at Penn State's Pattee Library, ca. 1946.*

**Birkner:** What courses did you teach at Penn State during your career there?

**Klein:** I always taught the United States History from colonial days to 1860. We had two parts of the program, from beginning to the Civil War, and the Civil War to date, whatever the date was. In the graduate level courses there were two

groups: lecture courses and seminars. Of the lecture courses, I taught U.S. Social History and U.S. Constitutional History for a couple of terms. I also taught Historical Methods as a seminar, which I enjoyed very much. I had some success developing a number of doctoral thesis ideas in that course. I also taught a course on Pennsylvania History to undergraduates, often three or four times a year. I taught my speciality, Jacksonian America, and a seminar in Pennsylvania history.

**Birkner:** Did you teach regularly in the summer?

**Klein:** Off and on. When I got began working hard on the Buchanan book I requested time off in the summer. They were good enough to give me summer terms off with full pay for research leave.

**Birkner:** That leads me to my next question. You had it in your mind as early as the 1930s that someday you would write a biography of James Buchanan. Yet your book on Buchanan was published, to good critical reception, only in 1962.<sup>10</sup> Explain the sixteen years from the time you came back from the war to the time the book was published. Did it take sixteen years to do Buchanan, or did other things intervene?

**Klein:** Others things mostly intervened. I was getting classes ready, I was directing theses, was secretary and later president of the PHA, I got involved with the Historical Foundation of Pennsylvania, I was writing articles, I was making speeches, and I was co-author of three other books. I had the department chairmanship for three difficult years, as the state had no budget during my term, and the university operated on a zero-budget basis.

**Birkner:** So how did the Buchanan book get written?

**Klein:** My Dad deserves credit for prodding me. He said, "For goodness sake, if you don't put something down on paper now, or it'll never get done." I was still collecting material, my boxes were getting fuller and fuller. And so I finally started to write. I wrote enough to fill two printed volumes of six hundred pages each.

**Birkner:** But that's not what we have.

**Klein:** (Laughs) No, it's not. Our editor at the press up here, August Jennings, read it over and said, "Well, you've got an interesting story, but you overdid it. Why don't you cut it down, and focus on the main stuff." It took me about a year to do that. August made Buchanan into a book that would read much better. But he wouldn't let me say anything in the preface about him. He really ought to get recognized.

**Birkner:** Well, you've just recognized him. Did your father live to see your book in print?

**Klein:** Yes. It was dedicated to him.

**Birkner:** That must have been gratifying to him.

**Klein:** Very gratifying.

**Birkner:** Let me talk a little about the Buchanan book. It may be the thing you'll be best known for outside of Pennsylvania, within the profession for certain. Let

me start by picking up on something Robert Murray recently did. In a book fresh off the press, he discusses a recent survey of scholars and how they rate our presidents.<sup>11</sup> Buchanan is ranked at the bottom as a failure. This would seem to be a consensus of professional historians. It was when you started writing about Buchanan as well. What do you make of those who rate Buchanan as a failure?

**Klein:** It depends on the criteria you use for judgment. The press wouldn't accept the title I wanted to give that book.

**Birkner:** Which was?

**Klein:** *Cursed Are the Peacemakers*: which I think is the fate of James Buchanan. His character and his life's work indicate he tried to calm the infighting within the factions of the party of which he was a member. He was a peacemaker. That's why he was a good diplomat. That's a diplomat's business. And he did his business as President. There was no war during his administration. I think that it was his fate to be a convenient person to blame for something that everybody hated. The South didn't like the Civil War, the North didn't like the Civil War. An easy way out was to blame Buchanan.

**Birkner:** You see Buchanan as a scapegoat?

**Klein:** The reason I say this flows from listening to one of the most distinguished historians of U.S. history, Andrew Cunningham McLaughlin. He knew little about Buchanan, and he repeated the commonplace lies. If a person like that is going to do it, everyone will do it. For example, the English Bill. Here's a so-called bribe of millions of acres, supported by Buchanan, to make Kansas a slave state. Did you ever hear that?

**Birkner:** Yes.

**Klein:** Did you know the fact: That it was a bribe of millions of acres to make it a free state. That was the truth. But the northern press of the time and the abolitionists and the radical Republicans did not permit the truth to come out.

**Birkner:** Yet Roy Nichols wrote in *Disruption of American Democracy*. . .

**Klein:** (Interrupting) Oh, he doesn't like Buchanan either.<sup>12</sup>

**Birkner:** Do you disagree with the notion that Buchanan was physically subpar, emotionally subpar, surrounded by sycophants and corrupt individuals?

**Klein:** He was physically and emotionally in better control than many politicians of the era. He was certainly surrounded by some corrupt individuals. You asked a question that's difficult to answer quickly, because it involves so many cases. (Stephen A.) Douglas and Buchanan, for example, were personal enemies, not just political enemies. Buchanan didn't like Douglas as a human being. He thought he was crude and vulgar. Douglas made passes at Harriet Lane and was coarse with Ada Cutts, whom he later married. I think Buchanan did not have a very sound political sense in a power way. He often did not know where power lay. He maintained trust in some political associates who were exercising power without his knowledge. One of them was (John) Slidell. Another of them was (John B.) Floyd. He would have done well to have side-tracked Slidell and never



*Flanked by his son, John Douglass, and his wife Dorothy, Klein poses for a Penn State University photographer in 1962. The occasion was presentation of the Louis H. Bell memorial award for his book, President James Buchanan.*

to have appointed Floyd to begin with. He could have found better people in the South to serve in his administration.

**Birkner:** Why did you come up with a different interpretation of Buchanan than the notion that he was not up to the job, which is Nichols's essential view?

**Klein:** Nichols provides no suggestions as to what the president might have or should have done. He did not understand why Buchanan could not, for example, face down (Simon) Cameron from the very start, in 1845, while Buchanan was Secretary of State. Buchanan showed some caution because of the Mexican War. Cameron was after him to say, "is there going to be peace or war between us?" Buchanan wouldn't reply. He could have faced up at that point to Senator Cameron, but it would have caused considerable difficulty for the Polk Administration. Cameron wrecked him. When it came to the Senatorship in 1857, Buchanan reluctantly and belatedly supported (John) Forney. It was a poor choice, because Forney's emotional instability and vitriolic pen had alienated many Democrats. Simon Cameron, newly a Republican, easily bought the votes he needed to win. This episode showed a lack of courage and good judgment, on Buchanan's part. He lacked the adventurism that a good politician often has.

**Birkner:** You mean sixth sense, or instinct.

**Klein:** Well, Buchanan would have said compromise. I think without the theme of compromise dominating the executive department, you would have a dictator.



Because the Constitution calls for compromise as a basic governing tool, I think Buchanan was more concerned with maintaining the form of government than he was with maintaining the nation itself. He thought the nation without this form of government wasn't worth saving.

**Birkner:** To give you a homely analogy I recently heard in a lecture by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., it strikes me that Lincoln had a better sense of proportion than Buchanan did. See what you make of it. Schlesinger was speaking about Lincoln and civil liberties. He drew a quote from Lincoln, talking about occasions when Lincoln went beyond the letter of the Constitution, indeed, bent the Constitution. He said, it makes sense when a person has gangrene of the leg to cut off the leg and save the person. But one never wisely takes a life to save a limb. You have to have the larger view in mind.<sup>13</sup> What you seem to be suggesting is that Buchanan was so attached to the Constitution he was unwilling to recognize the Union itself was in the balance.

**Klein:** Your point is well taken, but by 1860–61 the leg had already been severed. That was secession, a part of the Union removed. The distinction Buchanan drew was the distinction between the existence of the nation and the existence of the constitutional form of government. Buchanan thought the nation would endure, though temporarily reduced in size, but it would lose its unique and most valuable quality without the constitutional form of operation. Lincoln preserved the nation, but destroyed the original form of government. The war voided the 10th Amendment and nearly destroyed the federal system.

**Birkner:** One of the things I remember you writing is that the years after 1865 marked the "second republic." Scholars like Theodore Lowi have embraced this idea, too, and I find it compelling, because after the war we had a different constitutionalism.<sup>14</sup>

**Klein:** And the years after 1933 mark the third republic.

**Birkner:** And I think Lowi buys that, too. But you're saying that Buchanan felt that the constitutionalism that he'd grow up with was so important to him, so sacred, that he would rather the Union broke than lose it.

**Klein:** Well, you've put it a little differently than he would. First, he believed that if the president broke the Constitution by initiating a military attack on a seceding state, that act would destroy the nation. Second, he believed that the nation would persist, but that our original form of federal constitutional government—a major idea in the history of mankind—might never again be achieved. He had an intense devotion to the framework within which the United States functioned. If that framework broke down, the nation would be no different than any other nation that had ever existed in priorities, and be subject to all their familiar flaws.

**Birkner:** Does one fairly sense that Philip Klein is sympathetic to the priorities that Buchanan had?

**Klein:** In the light of world history, I agree that the American constitutional

system is more important than the nation it created. I think that Buchanan also felt this way. Elbert Smith wrote a book on Buchanan as President.<sup>15</sup> I reviewed it. I pointed out that while it was a very fine book in many ways, Smith omitted the key point about his subject. Every time he accused Buchanan of being pro-Southern, he should have said he was pro-Constitution. He rarely if ever mentioned the role of the Constitution in explaining Buchanan's thoughts and actions. He presents Buchanan's key decisions and acts to readers as if Buchanan was guided by sympathy to or fear of the South. And I see that as a total misconception of what the man was doing, and his reasons for doing it. When the South was constitutionally in the right, he backed the South. When the North was, he backed the North. When either side acted against the clear mandate of the Constitution, he opposed it. The measurement was, is it within the realm of the Constitution? Is secession within the realm of the Constitution? He didn't know. Neither did Lincoln. Is the survival of the Union within the realm of the Constitution? Yes, he said, it is.<sup>16</sup>

**Birkner:** My assumption is that Lincoln did not accept the concept of secession as legitimate under the Constitution. He never recognized the South as an independent entity. He never recognized secession as a legitimate act.

**Klein:** No, he never recognized it as a legitimate act. But he recognized it as an existing act. There is a difference.

**Birkner:** One of the things my students always have trouble with is the awkward position Buchanan finds himself in during the winter of 1860-61, when he says that secession is not acceptable, but neither is putting down secession something he can consider doing. Is that a fair reading of his position?

**Klein:** It's a fair reading in the phrases that you have used. On the other hand, he did not think that it was unconstitutional to employ force of arms to enforce federal laws in areas that no longer observed the Constitution. I'm using his words. And he ordered an armed warship, the *Brooklyn*, to establish a base from which to collect tariffs in Charleston Harbor. He was not the one who sent the *Star of the West*. He didn't know about that 'till the *Star of the West* was out at sea. Anyhow, his position was that you must use force to sustain federal law, but you don't use force to break secession. You enforce existing law and enforcing that law may break secession. Buchanan did not accept secession. He never thought that way at all. He merely stated that the Constitution gave no answer to the problem.

**Birkner:** Somehow I think we're playing a semantic game. The reality of the Confederacy was a broken union, and Buchanan was not prepared to do anything violent to restore the Union.

**Klein:** Correct. Neither was Lincoln. And Lincoln didn't.

**Birkner:** Until Fort Sumter.

**Klein:** Yes. But I think if Fort Sumter had occurred in Buchanan's administration the same thing would have happened.

**Birkner:** You think he would have called for volunteers.

**Klein:** Of course he would.

**Birkner:** You're suggesting that Lincoln's policy in the secession crisis is Buchanan's policy, and that Buchanan's policy becomes Lincoln's policy.

**Klein:** Hundreds of people said that at the time; that's commonplace stuff. Republicans cursed Lincoln for following Buchanan's policy. The newspapers were full of it.

**Birkner:** Since you make a strong and vivid case for Buchanan not being a weakling in the secession crisis, is it possible to interpret Buchanan as a poor, even a dismal president, without holding him responsible for not doing anything about secession?

**Klein:** That's a bit too complicated. But consider Allan Nevins's article in *American Heritage*, in which he concludes that if Buchanan had had one ounce of the courage of Andrew Jackson he could have stopped secession in its tracks by hitting it with a vicious blow to the jaw—that the way to stop secession was to mobilize the army in advance, and threaten to start killing secessionists.<sup>17</sup> That's probably one of the most ridiculous things that has ever been said by a historian. You should know what the result of that kind of action would have been: a permanently broken Union. At least half the North would not have approved of that procedure.<sup>18</sup>

**Birkner:** That context that you offer is one of the reasons that Lincoln was so delicate in his response. He did not want to give the appearance of being the aggressor.

**Klein:** Correct. He certainly did not want to be caught down in Washington with a war on his hands, and Pennsylvania not with him. Washington was always in danger. The people there had to go through hostile territory whichever way they moved, and that was not pleasant.

**Birkner:** What did you learn writing the biography of Buchanan that surprised you the most?

**Klein:** I think what surprised me the most was to find how far from the truth so many statements that had been taught to me were, and how blatantly the reversal of truth had been. Chiefly, it's the story of Kansas. I was a good friend of many of the people who emphasized how horrible the Kansas tragedy was, and how Southerners did everything wrong. The evidence I've read—and I've read both sides—shows that the mischief about balances out, and that Buchanan's solution was to get two groups of people who were emotionally out-of-control together before they killed each other. He came up with a solution that would do it, but one side wouldn't take the solution.<sup>19</sup>

**Birkner:** Would you at least agree that Buchanan expended an awful lot of political capital on behalf of a cause that was not realistic—admitting Kansas immediately into the Union?

**Klein:** That's what he wanted to do.

**Birkner:** But it was not a realistic cause, given how few slaves were in Kansas, how few supporters of slavery were there, and how strong opinion in the North was against the admission of Kansas as a slave state.

**Klein:** This suggests a lack of knowledge of what would happen once Kansas came in as a slave state. It already had a free state legislature. Nobody was disputing that. It would be there for a year. Within ten minutes it could call for another Constitutional Convention. A new Constitution legally supplants the old one. If what the Northerners were saying was true, that a majority in Kansas was antislavery, it could call a convention, control it, control the election machinery, and make Kansas a free state. Within one month, the whole thing would be done, legally, without Congress. That's what Buchanan was after. Why was that such a horrible thing? Buchanan proposed: "We want to admit it now to get the fight done. And in one month, if what these Republicans say is true, they can have what they want." But Republicans wanted a fight, not a solution. That's the key. The Republicans needed that fight, to keep their hopes alive for 1860.

**Birkner:** If it was so self-evident that Kansas would very soon be a free state, why did the South invest so much emotion in it?

**Klein:** Because if Kansas became a slave state it would restore the balance between free and slave states in the Senate—sixteen each. The South felt this to be critical to its influence and indeed its survival.

**Birkner:** Couldn't Buchanan have avoided putting so much of his influence on the line in support of the Lecompton Constitution?

**Klein:** Well, if the President had done nothing, what would have happened? Here's the situation: The Lecompton Constitution is sitting in front of him, and he is supposed to submit it to Congress or not. If he had not submitted it to Congress, then he was declaring that the North has won, Kansas won't come in as a state. And what would go on except continuing war out there? Now you answer that question.

**Birkner:** Fair enough. But it strikes me that he could have suggested that the Lecompton Constitution was written by a very small sliver of the population of Kansas and that when a Constitutional Convention was held that reflected the will of the people of Kansas he would be happy to hear of it. Might he not have said that?

**Klein:** He might have, but not constitutionally. An executive cannot void an election because a lot of voters failed to go to the polls. That would fatally wound the election system. Lincoln said the same thing about the protests and demands for a new election by citizens of the newly proposed state of West Virginia who boycotted the vote on the new free-state Constitution.

**Birkner:** Let's assume Buchanan had no other option but to do as you suggest. Why did he have to make Lecompton such a major priority? It strikes me in reading Nichols and other works that Lecompton is a centerpiece for Buchanan. Why didn't he treat it as a small matter and work on some other things?

**Klein:** I think he would have loved to have done that, but how would you have made Watergate a small matter? This is the problem. The press wouldn't, and especially the Republicans wouldn't. They knew they had him. Buchanan had an answer that would have solved it; but they didn't want it solved.

**Birkner:** We've reached no agreement here, but I think having the argument is engaging and useful. Finally, how did you answer Professor Murray's questionnaire about Buchanan as President?

**Klein:** I don't remember.

**Birkner:** (Laughs) Come on, for the record.

**Klein:** Every president must be judged on all sorts of actions and methods of handling many kinds of situations. On some of these, I rated Buchanan high, on others, low. I can't recall at this moment how I judged him in each of the scores of cases presented in Murray's questionnaire. On the theme of keeping options open for peace rather than plunging recklessly into war, I rated him highly. Overall, I think I put him near the middle. I rated him high on foreign affairs. Remember, a rating depends on what you want in a president. I think a successful president is one who avoids a war. Whether Buchanan did it the right way or not, I don't know. Who can really say? I don't think he was a failure. I think the kind of president Nevins admires would have been a failure, because he would have started the war, and the North would not have responded the way it did after the attack on Fort Sumter, the Pearl Harbor of that era. His view of the proper act of a President would have been fight quick and hard. I don't know that that would have been the proper answer. I can't prove it; he can't, either. (Laughs)

**Birkner:** Would you say a word about your credo as a historian?

**Klein:** I'd stress how important to understanding what's going on now it is to know what has gone on before. Some say only the future is important. Baloney. The past is what makes the future. The more you know about the past the more future there is. Without memory of the past, you have no future at all. When leadership has been more historically literate, you've had a better leadership, and a better future.

**Birkner:** Well on that note, I thank you.

**Klein:** My pleasure.

## Notes

I am grateful to the Millersville University faculty development fund for a grant which helped defray expenses in researching this article. Philip Klein's cooperation and active assistance have, from start to finish, been essential to my work. I owe him a great debt for his

patient, cheerful, and always timely responses to many letters, and to his painstaking work on the transcript of our conversation.

1. For another version of this story, incorporated in Klein's tribute to Nichols as teacher,

scholar and promoter of Pennsylvania Historical Studies, see Philip S. Klein, "Laborer in Penn's Vineyard," *Pennsylvania History*, 38 (January 1971): 34. See also, in the same issue, Russell F. Weigley, "Roy F. Nichols: Teacher" (pp. 44-50).

2. This theme is a subtext in much of Nichols's work, ranging from his pioneering *The Democratic Machine, 1850-1854* (New York, 1923) to his last monograph, *The Invention of American Political Parties* (New York, 1967). Nichols reviews his life's interest in social science and model building in his autobiography, *A Historian's Progress* (New York, 1968), esp. chaps. 6, 7, 11. See also David M. Potter, "Roy F. Nichols and the Rehabilitation of American Political History," *Pennsylvania History*, 38 (January 1971): 1-20; and Margaret B. and Harry M. Tinkcom, "Roy F. Nichols and the Goals of History," in *ibid.*, 21-33.

3. Klein's thesis was published under the title *Pennsylvania Politics, 1817-1832: A Game Without Rules* (Philadelphia, 1940).

4. There are several published recollections of the founding of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, including Nichols, *A Historian's Progress*, pp. 112-115; *idem*, "Lawrence Henry Gipson and the Pennsylvania Historical Association," *Pennsylvania History*, 36 (January 1969): 16-21; and Philip S. Klein, "Our Pennsylvania Heritage, Yesterday and Tomorrow," *Pennsylvania History*, 25 (January 1958): 1-8.

5. Klein's talk, "The Importance of Preserving Wheatland," delivered at the PHA annual meeting in Lancaster, October 16, 1937, was actually preceded by another paper: "Early Lancaster County Politics," delivered at the Pennsylvania Historical Association's annual meeting in Pittsburgh, April 19-20, 1935.

6. Klein was appointed Secretary of the PHA on May 18, 1946, to fill the unexpired term of Dr. J. Paul Selsam. He served until July 1, 1953, when he assumed the Chairmanship of the Penn State History Department. See S.K. Stevens, "An Expression of Appreciation," *Pennsylvania History*, 21 (January 1958): 92.

7. Klein served as President of the PHA from 1954-1957. His presidential address, "Our Penn-

sylvania Heritage, Yesterday and Tomorrow," was published in *Pennsylvania History*, 25 (January 1958): 1-8.

8. Published as *Harper's Ferry and the New Technology: The Challenge of Change* (Ithaca, 1977).

9. See listing, below.

10. *President James Buchanan: A Biography* (University Park, Pa.: 1962).

11. Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, *Greatness in the White House: Rating the Presidents, Washington Through Carter* (University Park, Pa., 1989). An earlier version was published by the two authors as "The Presidential Performance Study: A Progress Report," *Journal of American History*, 70 (December 1983): 535-555. For the original "Schlesinger" polls, see Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., in *Life*, Nov. 1, 1948, pp. 65-66, 68, 73-74; *New York Times Magazine*, July 29, 1962, pp. 12-13, 40-41, 43.

12. Nichols's Pulitzer Prize winning study, *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York, 1948), portrays Buchanan as a weak leader trapped by circumstances he could not control.

13. Schlesinger's lecture, delivered at Gettysburg College in November 1988, was subsequently published in pamphlet form as *War and the Constitution: Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt* (Gettysburg, Pa. 1988). The Lincoln story is recounted on p. 16.

14. See Philip S. Klein, "Patriotic Myths and Political Realities: Buchanan and the Origins of the Civil War," *The Lock Haven Review*, 15 (1974): 76; and Theodore Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of the United States* (second ed., New York, 1979).

15. Elbert B. Smith, *The Presidency of James Buchanan* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1975).

16. For a similar argument, directed at James A. Rawley's *Bleeding Kansas and the Coming of the Civil War* (Philadelphia, 1969), see Klein's essay in the *Lock Haven Review*, esp. pp. 74-76.

17. Allan Nevins, "The Needless Conflict," *American Heritage*, 7 (August 1956): 4-9, 88-90.

18. Klein's criticism of Nevins's *American Heritage* article and the same author's account of the Lecompton Constitution struggle in *The*

*Emergence of Lincoln* is expressed more expansively in "Patriotic Myths and Political Realities," 65-77.

19. One recent work which complements Klein's analysis is Donald V. Weatherman, "James Buchanan on Slavery and Secession," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 15 (Fall 1985): 796-805. For contrary views, see, among other sources, Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978); Mark Summers, *The Plundering Generation: Corruption and the Crisis of the Union, 1849-1861* (Lexington, Ky. 1987), esp. chap. 15; David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York, 1976), chaps. 11-19, and passim; and James MacPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York, 1988), esp. pp. 163-167, 178-179, 225-226.

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