

## Exhibit Review

### **“Making History”:**

**Exhibit at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania,  
November 18, 1994 through May 27, 1995**

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History, as this long-running exhibit reminded us, is constructed from evidence. The goal of “Making History,” an exhibition recently on view at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, was to show how academic historians as well as costume and set designers, art and architectural historians, script writers, genealogists, novelists, and others have used the rich and varied evidence in the collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania to recreate the past. On view from November, 1994, through May, 1995, at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, this show aimed not only to showcase the extensive HSP collections but also to communicate some of the sheer excitement that can accompany historical research.

The exhibit, which was curated by Cynthia J. Little and designed by Kim Tieger, was divided into several color-coded sections containing objects and ideas varied enough to appeal to a wide audience. An introductory room filled with late nineteenth-century circus and theatre posters set the stage. Nearby, a freestanding showcase filled with museum correspondence illustrated the ways that requests for information from the museum are handled and suggested some of the complexity inherent in making the Society’s extensive collections accessible to a large and diverse constituency.

“Historic Philadelphia Emerges,” the exhibit’s opening section, cited the founding of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1824 as the moment that Philadelphia’s historical consciousness awakened. A display of materials relating to William Penn’s now-demolished 1699 Slate Roof House, including early painted and photographic images, an original lock and key, and a late nineteenth-century model of the building, highlighted the ways in which public memory is constructed and preserved. Anniversaries and important events—such as the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence or Lafayette’s 1824 visit to Philadelphia—have figured prominently in this construction by heightening historical consciousness and rekindling interest in the past.

“Preserving Places and Pasts,” which included Independence Hall’s famous “Liberty and Equality Chair”—constructed with mahogany from Christopher Columbus’ house in Santo Domingo—and a portion of William Penn’s Treaty Elm, revealed how the resources of HSP have aided previous preservation and local history efforts. This section also examined the ways in which researchers have utilized maps, blueprints, photos, insurance records, and other documents to identify, conserve, or interpret original buildings ranging from Benjamin Chew’s Cliveden, the Powel House, and the Woodlands to City Hall and Independence Hall. Still, as this exhibit suggested, despite an awakening interest in preservation, Philadelphia’s post-Civil War building boom encouraged the demolition of many historic buildings. As a

result, photographs of now-demolished buildings, including Latrobe's Bank of Pennsylvania, the Graff House, and the Burd Mansion, amount to much more than mere building obituaries; for architectural historians, such photographs also constitute critical pieces of evidence.

Sections on neighborhoods and private homes revealed how the Society's collections document nearly every aspect of Philadelphia's physical history. Administrative records from schools, clubs, and factories, census lists, and early city atlases chronicle residential development and population shifts in neighborhoods from Germantown to Kensington, while early photographs and watercolors capture layers of physical change. In the section entitled "Private Homes," a fine collection of documents and photographs spanning almost two centuries, suggested how architectural researchers construct house histories from evidence as varied as real estate promotional brochures, telephone directories, newspaper photographs, early land drafts, and insurance surveys. Documents such as an Overbrook Farms telephone directory from 1899, in which real estate developers Wendell & Smith boasted of such amenities as telephone service, "sparkling underground spring water," and electric lighting, or a 1906 newspaper advertisement for new West Philadelphia homes stressing their proximity to the newest means of transportation—the elevated train—speak eloquently of Philadelphia's physical growth.

Costumes and set designers, script and fiction writers, actors, re-enactors, and museums also recreate history, and the section entitled "Re-creating the Past" showed just how extensively and imaginatively they have used the raw materials available at HSP to do so. Resources ranging from early photographs and valentines to paper dolls and nineteenth-century engravings have helped film production companies, theatrical designers, musicians, and greeting card manufacturers to research and authenticate their varied reconstructions of the past. Engravings from mid-nineteenth-century editions of *Godey's Lady's Book* that capture details of high-style dress fashion have been used by costume designers and film production companies to research authentic costumes and hairstyles. A 1745 hymnal book from Ephrata Cloister has formed the basis for performances by choral groups seeking to preserve the Cloister's religious choral tradition. Similarly, several *circa* 1900 photographs which show people in various poses—a bather, a football player, a lame man, children playing—are rich with information and detail for actors, costume designers, historians, and all who would take the time to look.

"Pieces From Family Puzzles," which reminded us that the Historical Society of Pennsylvania constitutes the largest center for genealogical research in the mid-Atlantic region, focused on the ways that genealogists use the extensive HSP collections to construct family histories. This section included documents and objects ranging from Benjamin Franklin's 1758 genealogical chart to a photograph from an 1898 family reunion, from late eighteenth-century liberty papers designed to secure or protect the freedom of black Philadelphians to an 1849 naturalization certificate, from an 1820 baptismal certificate—printed in German—to twentieth-century funeral records and double-sized funeral fans. A nearby section on wedding and divorce-related materials ranging from marriage certificates, a pair of 1795 wedding slippers, and a silver coffee pot fashioned by Joseph Richardson, Sr. to a discussion of the 1849 divorce records of the British actress and abolitionist Frances Ann Kemble exemplified the deft mixture of objects and documents that was one of this exhibit's greatest strengths.

The final section, "What's New About What's Old," considered how historians continually re-examine history, ask new questions about old material, and reconstruct the past. This

portion of the exhibit also showcased documents from the Society's fine collection of William Penn Papers, including a 1695 love letter from William Penn to his fiancé Hannah Callowhill, their 1696 marriage certificate, and a 1736 survey of Pennsbury Manor. Finally, this section also highlighted some of the many authors who have published books based on research undertaken in the HSP collections, including Thomas Doerflinger, who used eighteenth-century merchants' accounts books to track the day-to-day business transactions of typical Philadelphia merchants for *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, and Gary Nash, who found many of the sources used for *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1729-1840* among the collections at HSP.

"Making History" has done an admirable job of marshaling and displaying the varied types of raw materials that historians use to construct our images of the past. Particularly effective was the range of materials used: objects and documents appeared together in a thoughtful and often compelling mixture. One of the exhibit's greatest contributions was to sharpen public awareness of its collections. Perhaps most importantly, the show also effectively communicated something of the excitement inherent in the shifting nature of historical research itself. As the widening scope of historical research has expanded the diversity of people and topics included in historical scholarship, and as new evidence emerges and "old" evidence is reinterpreted, historians, we are reminded, "continually ask new questions about what's old." Still, despite these many strengths, visitors come away with little sense of the actual process of "making" history: the rewarding—and sometimes maddening—search for elusive evidence as well as the varied processes by which historians link these bits of evidence together to construct—and revise—an interpretation. History, after all, consists of a story as well as evidence, and the process of constructing and telling that story can be just as compelling as the evidence itself.

Courtesy Historical Society of Pennsylvania



*Now considered an architecturally important structure, the Bank of Pennsylvania on Second Street near Walnut in Philadelphia is shown during its demolition in 1867. Designed by architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the neoclassical building had been built between 1799 and 1801. The photograph illustrates one need for the collections at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania: groundwork for preservation of historic buildings. The image in the Society's Boies Penrose Collection.*