

# Diverging Views of Life in Eighteenth-Century Pennsylvania: A Review Essay

By Ronald C. Carlisle. *The Story of "Woodville": The History, Architecture, and Archaeology of a Western Pennsylvania Farm.*

(Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, 1998. Pp. xiv, 170. \$18.95.)

By Peter Thompson. *Rum Punch & Revolution: Taverngoing & Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia.*

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. Pp. ix, 265. \$42.50.)

These two monographs explore divergent aspects of life in Pennsylvania during the colonial and early national period. Ronald C. Carlisle's *Story of "Woodville": The History, Architecture, and Archaeology of a Western Pennsylvania Farm* focuses on the ownership of John Neville's farm and its evolution from an eighteenth-century frontier Virginia plantation to an investment banker's country house during the twentieth century. In contrast, Peter Thompson's *Rum Punch & Revolution: Taverngoing & Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* explores another aspect of colonial culture in this hotbed of political activity during this era.

Both of these works fit effectively into the context of existing literature. Thompson's study of taverns in Philadelphia joins an increasingly sizable list of books studying life in this eighteenth-century community. Beginning with Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh's *Rebels and Gentlemen: Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin* (1942),<sup>1</sup> the colonial capital has received more attention from scholars than any other community in colonial Pennsylvania. The 1970s, with the development of the "new social history" and the commemoration of the nation's bicentennial, saw an increasing interest in the history of early Philadelphia. Monographs published during this decade include Charles S. Olton's *Artisans for Independence: Philadelphia Mechanics and the American Revolution* (1975), Stephen E. Lucas's *Portents of Rebellion: Rhetoric and Revolution in Philadelphia, 1765-76* (1976), Richard Alan Ryerson's *Revolution is Now Begun: The Radical Committees of Philadelphia, 1765-1776* (1978), and Gary B. Nash's *Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (1979).<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s, economic and cultural interests continued to appeal to historians, as evidenced by the publication of John K. Alexander's *Render them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1800* (1980), Thomas M. Doerflinger's *Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (1986), Ian M. G. Quimby's *Apprenticeship in Colonial Philadelphia* (1986), Steven Rosswurm's *Arms, Culture, and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and the "Lower Orders" in*

*the American Revolution, 1765 to 1783* (1987), and Edwin Wolf II's *Book Culture of a Colonial American City: Philadelphia Books, Bookmen, and Booksellers* (1988).<sup>3</sup> In *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (1990), Billy G. Smith provided a demographic, social, and economic history of Philadelphia during the last half of the eighteenth century, focusing on the city's poor.<sup>4</sup> Peter Thompson's *Rum Punch & Revolution* represents an intriguing contribution to this rich literature, as it demonstrates that during the colonial period Philadelphia's taverns served as an effective means for all social classes to intermingle.

Thompson begins his analysis by examining the process of licensing tavern keepers in William Penn's "greene country town." The proprietors and other government officials sought to restrict who would operate taverns, as these institutions were perceived as immoral businesses because of the potential for excessive drinking and improper sexual relationships. According to Thompson, workers drank with their employers, resulting in social co-mingling in the taverns. These associations, however, would have their limits during Philadelphia's early years, for while they may have transcended socio-economic classes, they seldom crossed ethnic boundaries. The city's German community, in particular, experienced verbal abuse from British citizens when visiting these facilities. Over time, taverns evolved into more than places for eating and drinking, as their accommodations expanded to include stables and lodgings. By the time of the Revolution, taverns had become legitimate businesses that served as the location for intense political debates, in addition to social gatherings.

According to Thompson, taverns also became more exclusive as political unrest in the town intensified. The influence of taverns on political culture dated back to the Keithian controversy of the late 1600s and was especially influential in the 1764 assembly election. With the onset of the Stamp Act crisis in 1765, however, the nature of the debate changed, and the opportunity for popular participation in tavern rhetoric began to diminish. The construction of City Tavern in the 1770s, with its "Large Room" upstairs, provided a private area for discussion, and from its inception City Tavern appealed to Philadelphia's elites as a place to argue provincial and imperial policies separated from the "lower sort." Thus, according to Thompson, the Revolution did not make debate more accessible to the masses through tavern life. Instead, by the mid-1770s the tavern had led to the development of a political culture "that was more closely associated with the committee room or the stage-managed event than with face-to-face discussion. . . ." (p. 181). Colonial Philadelphians visited the taverns because they valued free speech and behavior, but by the end of the eighteenth century taverns had evolved into social institutions where laborers of all religions and ethnicities mingled, but their views on political matters had become less important.

In contrast to the wealth of literature on colonial Philadelphia, western Pennsylvania, the focal point of Ronald C. Carlisle's *Story of "Woodville,"* has received less attention. Solon J. Buck and Elizabeth Hawthorn Buck's *Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania* (1939) is the earliest scholarly monograph on the region.<sup>5</sup> Other studies of the area include Joseph F. Rishel's *Founding Families of Pittsburgh: The Evolution of a Regional Elite, 1760-1910* (1990) and R. Eugene Harper's *Transformation of Western Pennsylvania, 1770-1800* (1991).<sup>6</sup> *The Story of "Woodville"* also is part of a larger body of scholarship, one that includes various aspects of public history such as historic preservation and historic site management.<sup>7</sup>

Ronald C. Carlisle has provided more than the history of a western Pennsylvania farm in *The Story of "Woodville."* In fact, the farm itself receives relatively little attention in the volume, as the history concentrates on its occupants rather than its physical composition. According to Carlisle, the story of "Woodville" is more properly that of John Neville, first owner of the property, and his descendants. Only secondarily does the historic house museum play a role in this tale.

During the eighteenth century, John Neville was one of many Virginians who settled in Augusta County, Virginia, (more accurately Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania) prior to the Revolution. Neville had served in General Edward Braddock's army during the French and Indian War, and during this experience he first encountered the land near the forks of the Ohio. By the mid-1770s Neville had assumed command of Fort Pitt, and for his service he received a land grant from Lord Dunmore, Governor of Virginia. "Woodville" itself, one of the homes built on this grant, probably was not constructed until the 1780s because of Neville's military service in the Revolution.

"Woodville" resembled a Virginia plantation in western Pennsylvania, and it reflected a style of domestic architecture common in the Chesapeake Bay region. Around the same time "Woodville" was built, Neville also established "Bower Hill" plantation; both of these farms replicated familiar surroundings. According to local tax lists, Neville owned twenty-one slaves in 1780, indicating that at least one of the plantations was in operation by that time. During the 1790s both houses, especially "Bower Hill," experienced damage from the Whiskey Rebellion, and staunch Federalist John Neville attracted the ire of local residents by publishing locations to register stills. "Woodville" survived the insurrection relatively unscathed because Neville had removed female family members there for safety, and neither he nor his eldest son Presley ventured near the plantation during the conflict.

"Woodville" is somewhat distinctive as an historic structure because its ownership passed through the female line after John Neville's death. Presley Neville had become involved in land speculation in the Ohio region, so after John's death the property was transferred to his niece, Eliza M. Kirkpatrick

Cowan, and then to her eldest daughter May Ann Cowan Wrenshall and subsequently her great-granddaughter Mary Bennington Wrenshall Fauset. Throughout these generations, "Woodville" evolved from a Virginia plantation house to incorporate elements of Gothic Revival architecture. By the 1930s, the barn had been removed and replaced by stables and a car garage. In 1976, the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation acquired the property. Since then this agency, in conjunction with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, has preserved the mansion as a historic home and public education center. Archaeological excavations of the site have revealed the evolution of the structure and its outbuildings, while at the same time creating confusion because of the mixture of Native American artifacts indigenous to the region with private collections by members of the Wrenshall family.

Both books contribute much to our understanding of life in early Pennsylvania. At the same time, however, both have flaws that detract from their overall effectiveness. *The Story of "Woodville,"* for instance, lacks citations, and the selected reading section at the end of the volume does not refer to any primary sources. Still, the origin for all of the illustrations—including excerpts from newspaper advertisements—is acknowledged. Furthermore, the book focuses more upon who owns "Woodville" than on the evolution of the structure, which was the most intriguing part of the volume.

In contrast, Peter Thompson has thoroughly documented his assessment of taverns and political culture in eighteenth-century Philadelphia. Among the primary sources consulted were account books, court dockets, tax lists, ledgers, and diaries. He has examined virtually every secondary work on the topic, although the absence of Jessica Kross's article on the sociology of drinking in the middle colonies published in *Pennsylvania History* in 1997, which contradicted his interpretation, is conspicuous. The article might have appeared while the book was in press, but there is at least one other entry published in 1997. Thompson is, however, especially effective in describing the culture of the tavern as a place where social classes could interact while simultaneously assessing the profitability of these enterprises.

Overall, both *Rum Punch & Revolution* and *The Story of "Woodville"* will please historians of early Pennsylvania. *Rum Punch & Revolution* enhances our understanding of the coming of the Revolution by exploring the social environment of the rhetorical discussions which led to mass action. *The Story of "Woodville"* endorses the necessity for preserving and interpreting Pennsylvania's physical past. In an indirect way, both books also approach the impact of alcohol on life in eighteenth-century Pennsylvania, from the taverns of Philadelphia to the Whiskey Rebellion of the West. The historiography of eighteenth-century Pennsylvania has been enriched with the publication of these two monographs.

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## Notes

1. Carl Bridenbaugh and Jessica Bridenbaugh, *Rebels and Gentlemen: Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942).
2. Charles S. Olton, *Artisans for Independence: Philadelphia Mechanics and the American Revolution* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1975); Stephen E. Lucas, *Portents of Rebellion: Rhetoric and Revolution in Philadelphia, 1765-76* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976); Richard Alan Ryerson, *The Revolution is Now Begun: The Radical Committees of Philadelphia, 1765-1776* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978); and Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).
3. John K. Alexander, *Render them Submissive: Responses to Poverty in Philadelphia, 1760-1800* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); Thomas M. Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Ian M. G. Quimby, *Apprenticeship in Colonial Philadelphia* (New York: Garland Publishers, Inc., 1986); Steven Rosswurm, *Arms, Culture, and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and "Lower Orders" in the American Revolution, 1765 to 1783* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987); and Edwin Wolf II, *The Book Culture of a Colonial American City: Philadelphia Books, Bookmen, and Booksellers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
4. Billy G. Smith, *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).
5. Solon J. Buck and Elizabeth Hawthorn Buck, *The Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1939).
6. Joseph F. Rishel, *Founding Families of Pittsburgh: The Evolution of a Regional Elite, 1760-1910* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990); and R. Eugene Harper, *The Transformation of Western Pennsylvania, 1770-1800* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991).
7. See: Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1979); Edward K. Muller and Ronald C. Carlisle, *Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania: An Inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Sites* (Washington, D.C.: Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, American's Industrial Heritage Project, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1994); and William Seale, *Recreating the Historic House Interior* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1979).