

**PUBLIC HERITAGE AS PROGRAM
STRENGTH:
HOW CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL
PARTNERSHIPS ENHANCE PENN STATE
HARRISBURG'S AMERICAN STUDIES
PROGRAM**

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No ready-made method for American Studies is in sight," observed Henry Nash Smith who, as much as any scholar, could lay claim to establishing the field as an academic area in its own right. "We shall have to develop one for ourselves." Smith wrote in 1957, and his topic was modes of academic inquiry, not models for academic administration and cross-institutional partnership. However, his sense that American Studies would evolve in decentralized fashion, out of various practices, rather than springing fully formed into the academic pantheon, was prescient. It still clarifies how specific American Studies programs and departments carefully wend their ways through the groves of academe, replete as those thickets are with the turf wars, budgetary struggles, and pedagogical arguments. A half century after Smith's prediction, the national American Studies Association lists nearly 200 programs offering majors or minors in the field. Over 30 of these offer graduate degrees. Each member program, reflecting the shape-shifting nature of a field devoted to interdisciplinary

PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY: A JOURNAL OF MID-ATLANTIC STUDIES, VOL. 74, NO. 4, 2007.
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American cultural study, must actualize a coherent version and vision of American Studies. Unsurprisingly, given Smith's predictive insight, each program has its own distinctive characteristics and reputation.

At Penn State Harrisburg, the American Studies Program came into being in 1972. Befitting the academic currents of that time, the Program claimed interdisciplinary cultural and social studies as its central mission, identifying a host of subfields in which graduate students might concentrate their Master's Degree work. There were nearly a dozen specialty areas, all of which aimed at explicating important questions in American life. At the time, the Middletown-based campus was known as Penn State Capital College, offering graduate and upper-division undergraduate courses on the grounds of the defunct Olmsted Air Force Base. Today, that once-austere venue has the look and feel of a residential college, with freshman-through-doctoral level programs. The American Studies Program, for its part, grew and morphed with its university, its campus, its region, and its field. Penn State's strategic plan, looking to capture and institutionalize a remarkable phase of growth, coinciding with the university's membership in the Big Ten conference, today calls for adding an American Studies Ph.D. to augment the Bachelor's and Master's Degree programs now in place. It thus falls to the Program and college administrators to determine what can make Penn State Harrisburg's American Studies Program distinctive.

Considering how Penn State's identity derives maximally from Pennsylvania itself, the emergent answer is that the American Studies Program should and must distinguish itself by reflecting the rich cultural region which sustains it. Preparing the Program for growth and change means focusing on Pennsylvania as a whole, and on the Capital Region specifically, as unique environments that can strengthen an academic program in ways specific to this Commonwealth and area. In practice, such orientation places a singular weight on building partnerships with the many institutions in the area which envision and implement cultural practices and policies. These are state, regional, and local entities, public and private alike, which Penn State Harrisburg's American Studies Program turns to for working relationships, event programming, curricular and classroom support, and topical guidance. In other words, cross-institutional relationships form the keystone in Penn State's plans to buttress its American Studies Program for the next generation. There are about three dozen graduate programs in American Studies across the United States. But only Penn State can offer a program

reflective of our Commonwealth's unique cultural legacy. What this means, however, is that already essential partnerships forged over the first thirty-five years will be even more crucial if the Program is to achieve stated goals. Preserving these links and growing new ones with external institutions firms up our plans.

"Public Heritage" as Preprogram Strength

The Program uses "Public Heritage" as an umbrella term denoting a host of historical and humanities-related activities. The term is currently gathering popularity in academic circles, since it covers practitioner-focused topics, including Museum Studies, Historic Preservation, Public History, Oral History, and Archival Management. Each of these subjects is now covered by discrete courses in the Penn State curriculum, and planned new seminars in Public Heritage and Local History will provide a capstone class for students interested in post-graduate employment. The logic of this curricular development is clearly seen in the Program's explanation of its mission in a curricular revision document recently approved by the requisite university committees, which will revamp the American Studies graduate offerings:

The program took advantage of its location in a renowned cultural region, featuring prominent historical sites in Harrisburg, Gettysburg, Hershey, York, Steelton, and Lancaster. Additionally, the program forged links to the state capital region's abundant governmental and Public Heritage agencies such as the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Besides becoming a popular graduate program for serving members of the Pennsylvania State Legislature, the program benefited from the PHMC's opportunities for graduate students to gain experience in the interdisciplinary world of public history, cultural conservation in public institutions such as museums, historical agencies, and archives . . . The program also serves as the headquarters for the Middle Atlantic American Studies Association . . . chapter of the national ASA.

Far from mere boilerplate, this passage reflects Penn State's understanding of its American Studies Program. It is the equivalent of a programmatic genome code: real academic DNA. Encoded in the statement is the clear message that

public agencies such as the PHMC, localities such as the varied towns and boroughs which dot central Pennsylvania, and transinstitutional academic organizations such as the MAASA, are intrinsically important to the Program's sense of identity. In self-describing to other university elements its programmatic conviction that cross-institutional partnerships supports the American Studies vision here at Penn State, the plan is to make clear that such partnerships are a predicate to any future success. Being a Harrisburg-area outpost of Penn State gives this program a chance to forge the aforementioned links, with such prestige and name recognition that a Big Ten university can muster. A quick survey of partner institutions reveals the breadth and depth of those partnerships.

Significant Partnerships, Mutual Benefits: MAASA

Penn State is everything but small. From Land Grant roots, the university grew into a mammoth, comprehensive Big Ten research institution, with an organizational framework befitting a school with over 80,000 students. Lending institutional coherence to such a major university system is the responsibility of high-level administrators (and legendary football coaches!). President Graham Spanier and Coach Joe Paterno each contribute to PSU holism, as do the various Boards of Regents, campus chancellors and provosts, and faculty groups. The phrase used to describe President Spanier's aim for university-wide consistency is "One university, geographically dispersed." The dispersal crisscrosses the Commonwealth, with two dozen branches. At Penn State Harrisburg, the lead administrator is the Chancellor, Dr. Madlyn Hanes. What all this mandates is that the PSH campus, and whatever happens there, fits smoothly into the university mix. It has to. It also means that there are forms to fill out and procedures to observe for nearly every contingency. Therefore, contemplating change or initiatives often means discovering and following necessary university protocols. Bottom line? Plenty of paperwork! So it is that the first programmatic partnership, with the regional chapter of the national ASA, emerged not just as a way for Penn State Harrisburg's American Studies community to remain in communion with the field at large, but also to be a veritable in-house alter-ego. This gives us the chance to "get small" when necessary in order to move swiftly on American Studies issues in a way that does not necessarily run through university bureaucracies.

Brainchild of Distinguished Professor Simon Bronner, who served as its president for from its 1996 founding until 2002, when he was succeeded by this author, MAASA claims as chapter members every ASA member in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, western New York state, and Virginia. Membership runs to nearly 2000. It is at the officeholder/board level that MAASA decisions are made. Currently, the Executive Board and Officer roster includes members from Franklin & Marshall College, Temple, Rutgers, La Salle, and Eastern Mennonite universities, in addition to Penn State. Two board members from the PHMC, Robert Weible and Ken Wolensky, also sit on the board. Weible, the PHMC's Director of Public History, and President of the National Council for Public History, has served from MAASA's creation. His ongoing presence ensures that public history concerns, and the PHMC, are always ably represented in MAASA deliberations.

Among MAASA's endeavors is a yearly conference, often with partner groups. At the most recent MAASA conference, in 2006 at the State Capitol Building, co-sponsoring organizations included the Pennsylvania Political Science Association, the state's oldest political science group, and the Legislative Office for Research Liaison, which assists Representatives, Senators, and their staffs. Then MAASA-president Kupfer cooperated with the PPSA's President, Tom Baldino, and LORL's leader, Michael King, in planning the conference. MAASA board member and Penn State Harrisburg graduate Michael Cassidy, who heads the House Democratic Caucus, was Chief Conference organizer, and the PHMC, Capitol Preservation Committee, Pennsylvania Humanities Council, and Senate and House of Representatives all supported the conference, the theme of which commemorated the Capitol's centenary: "100 Years Under the Dome: The Art and Politics of Pennsylvania." Earlier collaborators at joint conferences included the Pennsylvacketnia Black History Association, at the University of Scranton in 2003, and the New Jersey Folk Festival, at Rutgers, in 2005.

With such experience, it was a natural for MAASA to accept the invitation to expand its conference involvement in 2006. The hallmark was "Exploring Pennsylvania's Native American Heritage," a gathering held at the State Museum of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg, on October 14. Seven organizations co-sponsored what was a well-attended event: MAASA joined the McNeil Center for Early American Studies, Pennsylvania Archaeological Council, Pennsylvania Federation of Museums and Historical Organizations, PHMC, Society for Pennsylvania Archeology, and the State Museum. So pleased were the groups with the conference that plans are

already in the works for a successor event. At the same time, MAASA is privileged to cooperate with the Pennsylvania Historical Association and PHMC in sponsoring a series of book signings and readings. The first of a series featured co-authors Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht, who wrote *The Face of Decline: The Pennsylvania Anthracite Region in the Twentieth Century*, in 2005. Again further occasions are planned.

A simple, yet extremely effective MAASA method for building community awareness in and between American Studies-minded outfits across our service area is the *MAASA Newsletter*. Appearing twice a year, usually running up to 12 pages, the newsletter covers relevant events such as conferences and festivals, runs regular spotlight columns on various American Studies Programs at different colleges, and addresses developments in the field at the national and local level. Bronner recently wrote a personal analysis of what he titled "The Transnational Moment(um)," critiquing the ASA's movement towards internationalizing heretofore American-focused cultural studies. Another regular feature, the cover "American Studies Message" column, runs essays by various MAASA officers or members, such as Fran Ryan, Vice-President of the regional chapter and head of the program at La Salle University. The *Newsletter*, edited by Penn State Harrisburg Professor John Haddad, connects alumni from our Program with American Studies institutions around the Middle Atlantic, and brings the benefit of institutionalized, biannual communications exchanges with a host of peer organizations who are anxious to place their updates and achievements in print. Building awareness of the annual spring conference, the spring issue usually spells out conference arrangements and scheduling matters as well.

The key factor MAASA brings to the American Studies Program's ability to involve itself in all these events might fairly be termed "intentional indirectness." That is, with program faculty serving either as officers or board members, Penn State Harrisburg is assured of active representation at a variety of public and scholarly events. Yet, with professors such as me attending under MAASA auspices, it becomes less necessary to work through the carefully constructed labyrinth of Penn State policies regarding external activities. Too, having diverse representation inoculates MAASA against becoming a purely in-house Program operation, which would of course obviate the community-partnership building so important to success. MAASA, while hardly rich in cash, is sustained by such resource inflows as annual conference fees, and a yearly rebate from the national ASA. By spending a few hundred dollars here and there, judiciously, MAASA is now able to enjoy the energies

and camaraderie inevitable when organizations such as the PHA, PHMC, or State Museum work together to build cultural and intellectual community.

From the Field to the Classroom: Partnerships & Pedagogy

Every year, the American Studies Program admits students dreaming of curatorial, site management, or historical preservation careers. Such students do not aspire to faculty positions as such, but are rather seeking pre-professional training pursuant to in-field practices which they can use to good effect in their future jobs. Lest the Program give credence to the hoary jape, 'Those who can't do, teach,' it depends openly on the good offices of Harrisburg-area Public Heritage professionals, who serve as regular adjunct professors. Over the last decade, experts who have taught on a regular basis for the program include Barbara Franco, Executive Director of the PHMC; Bill Sisson, Chief Curator at the State Museum; Linda Ries, Head of Archives and Historical Management at the PHMC; Ken Wolensky, PHMC Historian; Mark Shaffer, PHMC Archaeologist; Linda Shopes, PHMC Historian; Troy Boyer, head of the Pennsylvania German Society, and Michael Sands, leader of Sands & Associates, grant-writing consultants.

Customarily, hiring adjuncts in a college setting is a depressing affair. Newly minted Ph.D.s, desperate for teaching experience, are paid sub-subsistence wages to teach courses, without job security or insurance benefits. The exploitative nature of the arrangement speaks for itself. But in this case, the difference is radical, and one of kind, not degree. The adjuncts above are distinguished by their full-time professional stature, and teach because they enjoy it, and also because they find having a hand in training the next generation of Public Heritage practitioners rewarding. For Penn State, the benefits are obvious. The American Studies Program can promise its incoming graduate students instruction by renowned experts in their respective fields. The attraction of being taught how to do oral history by the woman who wrote the tome of record on the subject (Shopes' *Making Sense of Oral History* is a favorite student text) is undeniable. Thanks to these practitioner-professorial partnerships, driven by selfless mid-career professionals who want to teach the next generation, Penn State Harrisburg is able to attract a high caliber of incoming students. Each incoming class is anxious to maximize exposure to and training from these dedicated professionals.

Formalized internships augment the classroom offerings, and each semester, students count on receiving the kind of professional development that sets the Program apart. The professor-student relationships in these classes often lead to career-long partnerships which strengthen the cords of connection still further. There is, in this arrangement, an element of obviousness when it comes to logic and merit. Still, few if any other American Studies graduate programs are positioned to emulate this plan. The fortuitous combination of location in the capital region of a state deeply conscious of its history and heritage, of concomitant access to a variety of committed professionals willing and eager to share their practical expertise, and of a university whose roots are in the pragmatic educational tradition, all combine with American Studies flexibility as a field. The resultant admixture is perhaps unique, and the students are the prime beneficiaries. Secondarily, the university and Commonwealth both benefit, as those students go on to create careers of their own, tending to the heritage they studied.

Students & Alumni Assets: Putting the Degree to Work

While some might attend graduate school simply for the intellectual rewards, most students hope to materially improve their current career, or maximize their future job prospects. Therefore, the American Studies Program serves a results-oriented student clientele, and must perforce maintain a commitment to practical, achievement-oriented pedagogy and curricular development. This is not, and has never been, a highly theoretical program in orientation and implementation. Bearing such pragmatism in mind, the students who move through the program and on to professions in the Public Heritage sphere constitute a ready-made matrix of potential partners, and have in fact enriched not just the Program but scores of host institutions where they work. This student/alumni network begins with internships, which students are encouraged to obtain during their graduate work. Dr. Michael Barton is well-positioned to serve as Internship Coordinator, inasmuch as he specializes in local Harrisburg and Pennsylvania history. Scores of Barton's interns have work or now work at such venues as the PHMC, the National Civil War Museum, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (where archaeologists are in high demand), the Hershey Museum of American Life, Landis Valley Museum, Army Heritage Museum in Carlisle, Mifflinburg Buggy Museum, State Museum of Pennsylvania,

Pennsylvania Railroad Museum, and National Museum of Civil War Medicine. The PHMC attracts dozens of interns each year, and other state agencies such as the State Museum also train students who receive course credit and are closely monitored with an eye toward professional training during the course of their internships. The efficacy of such exposure to actual in-field Public Heritage training is easily seen by the list of scores of program alumni, who work in all of the above institutions, in other museums and state agencies, and in county and local historical societies. For example, Barton's own projects at the Dauphin, Schuylkill, and Cumberland County historical societies paved a well-worn connective route to and from Penn State. Students engage in research projects at both venues, and the societies are staffed in part by program graduates. The pioneering influence in this regard was Emeritus Professor Irwin Richman, whose study tours to these sites built relationships between Penn State and the sites. A look at an alumni roster reveals scores of public heritage facilities across the region, staffed by professionals whose Master's degrees came from Penn State Harrisburg: The Daniel Boone Homestead, Cumberland County Historical Society, Cornwall Iron Furnace, Eckley Miner's Village, Ephrata Cloister, Adams County Historical Society, Dauphin County Historical Society, Fort Hunter Mansion, Hershey Museum of American Life, Heritage Center of Lancaster, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Barnes Foundation, University of Pennsylvania Archives, York County Historical Society, Kendall Whaling Museum, Historic Odessa Delaware Houses, Gunston Hall Plantation, Freer Gallery of Art, Winterthur Museum. The list grows exponentially with each graduating class. In fact, the Program at Penn State Harrisburg, concerned that the ties of alumni connecting the school with these sites might fray due to neglect, is currently in the midst of a plan to ensure the vibrancy, and when necessary to revivify, these connections. Richman's summer tour courses have been revived, for example.

Sometimes there is an element of serendipity which makes a partnership seem utterly natural. When this author arrived at Penn State Harrisburg, he contacted a high school friend now working in Baltimore. The friend, Edward Browning Meigs, mentioned off-handedly that his family had a connection to the Harrisburg region, having donated a home to Dauphin County in years past. Meigs suggested contacting Carl Dickson, Director of the Fort Hunter Mansion, Park, and Museum, whose PSU Master's Thesis on the historical site's legacy led to his professional position. Subsequently, it seemed a natural fit for me to join the Friends of Fort Hunter Board, where I still serve. In such

a fortuitous way was the binding tie between a local historical treasure, an academic program, an alumnus, and a new faculty member made strong. Student interns are now among the beneficiaries, obtaining needed field experience in American Studies work across the Fort Hunter complex.

Another programmatic initiative expands the roster of mutually beneficial partnerships in a close-at-hand way. The Harrisburg City Archives was, for decades, a locked room of uncatalogued, disarranged historical materials. Nobody, including Mayor Stephen R. Reed or Jeb Stuart, his Special Historical Consultant, was exactly sure of what this “basement room-*cum*-archive” contained. A spur towards organization came in the 1980s, when city government moved from old City Hall to the new Martin Luther King City Government Center. Mayor Reed literally ordered the random assemblage of records and artifacts saved from the dumpster, and Christine Amadure, a program graduate, made an initial inventory. In 2004, Barton himself visited the still-incompletely-catalogued collection to do research, and offered his own expertise, and the energies of his students. An agreement was signed that year between campus and city, which was recently renewed until 2011. Hundreds of feet of shelves have been organized and stacked, bound records arranged and examined, crates of items ranging from football helmets to political buttons to property transfer records all identified, tagged, and inventoried. The net cost to Harrisburg, and to Penn State, is zero, while students doing the work gain first-hand exposure to the kinds of skills they hope to utilize in their careers. Susan Harman, PHMC Archivist, works in close collaboration with the students, providing oversight and on-the-spot expertise. As with the many preexisting partnerships which so vivify the program and its many peer institutions, this arrangement has not only pragmatic benefits. It also keeps the Program connected to the region, making it a member of a Public Heritage, American Studies, intellectual community of organizations who care deeply about the historical legacy of Pennsylvania and the future protection of the Commonwealth’s past.

Other, smaller organizations have also become valued partners in recent years. Jump Street, and arts-outreach group located in downtown Harrisburg, actively promotes arts education, arts activities, and artistic community-building in the metropolitan Capital region. Currently, Brandon Gryde, a M.A. student now writing his Master’s Thesis, serves as a director, as well as editor of the student-themed arts magazine *AND: A New Diversity*. Thanks to Gryde’s aggressive courting of middle and high-school

students, humanities and arts activities stand to contribute further to the building of cross-institutional communities. This is in keeping not only with Program aspirations, but more importantly, with Jump Street's mandate to provide community and economic development through art and creative cultural work. Here it is the energies and talents of a student working in an organization which have the incidental benefit of furthering an American Studies Association goal, the lowering, or even better, the eradication, of the pernicious barrier between K-12 and higher education. As Jump Street reaches out to build humanities and arts communities in the schools of central Pennsylvania, all groups which care about and benefit from the establishment of cultural development stand to benefit. This surely includes the American Studies Program at PSH.

Since bringing public history to new audiences remains a bedrock principle, the shepherding of an oral history project involving the Pennsylvania House of Representatives has been a particularly notable Program partnership activity over the last few years. Again, Simon Bronner is the ramrod, working under the auspices of a grant he wrote for the express purpose of finding partnership support to actualize the envisioned endeavor. The project entails interviewing many serving and former politicians in the State Capitol, compiling their reminiscences and creating an accessible record of Pennsylvania's evolving political culture during the twentieth century. Obviously, this endeavor was much remarked upon at the 2006 joint conference sponsored by MAASA, the PPSA, and LORL, detailed above. Many other states already have such oral history programs, and Pennsylvania was a latecomer. There is a degree of irony in the project, since the Legislature is used to funding but not participating in projects. The entire affair runs under the auspices of the Bipartisan Management committee.

A more local partnership which reflects Penn State's overall commitment to outreach in the community is the Holocaust Survivor Oral History Project. This is a low-resource, high-reward pairing in which the American Studies Program assists the Harrisburg Jewish Community Center. The effort involves locating, interviewing, and taping oral histories of Holocaust survivors residing in Central Pennsylvania. Graduate students working in the on-campus Center for Pennsylvania Culture Studies then transcribe and archive the interviews, also transferring them to electronic storage formats. In this instance, the utility of the Center, established in 1990 and administered by the American Studies Program, promotes study and preservation of an important element of Pennsylvania's diversity. Other Center initiatives involve collaborations with city of Steelton,

whose photographic and material archives are located within the collection and likewise catalogued by students and made available to researchers.

Conclusions: Cross-Institutional Partnerships as *Sine Qua Non*

Stasis means lethargy, yet in an environment of scarcer resources and greater Public Heritage needs, cross-institutional partnerships offer the best way for Penn State Harrisburg's American Studies Program to build strength. Indeed, it is hard to envision another way in which this Program can erect a hedge to support future ambitions across the Middle Atlantic. Complementing institutional objectives, creating a dynamic environment in Pennsylvania which sustains a broad and active commitment to public history and humanities work, and collaborating on initiatives which will, borrowing from Penn State's current marketing slogan, "make life better," are the basic rationales behind partnership initiatives. The predicate logic is incontrovertible, but in life, and in academia, the best intentions often do not lead to the best outcomes. But in our fields, both philosophically and logistically, the stakes are too high not to cooperate. Philosophically, no institution has a monopoly on the public's heritage, or on Public Heritage. Logistically, with resources allocated to preserving, protecting, and promoting our histories always scarce, combining rather than dividing forces promises to be the only path to strength. Penn State Harrisburg's American Studies Program is fortunate to be part of a university which remains true to the modernized incarnation of Land Grant education. Such schools were established to educate the citizenry in hopes that graduates would return to, and uplift, their communities. In the sphere of Public Heritage, the Penn State program recognizes that Pennsylvania's past is too rich, and the community of those entrusted with studying it too impressive, for a narrow, particularistic approach. Instead of isolating ourselves from this cultural region, we must continue to immerse ourselves within it. It is the community at large which gives the Program its rationale, and it is cross-institutional partnerships alone which allow the Program to remain connected to, and to derive sustenance from, Pennsylvania, the Middle Atlantic, and the nation at large.