

OLD BOYS AND INVISIBLE WOMEN: A BRIEF  
ACCOUNT OF AN UNCOMFORTABLE  
RELATIONSHIP

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The Pennsylvania Historical Association began as a gathering of men who were concerned about maintaining the standards of the profession of history. The academy was threatened by the depression: colleges faced closing, departments lost positions, faculty salaries declined, teaching loads expanded. Could the profession survive? Sparked by prominent historians from several major universities in Pennsylvania, state historians sought to “emphasize research, spread knowledge of Pennsylvania history by publication and teaching, as well as otherwise promote more enthusiasm for the cause.”<sup>1</sup> There was a kind of missionary zeal to protect the profession from the onslaught of bad times, shrinking budgets and the shortsightedness of uninformed laymen.

History was defended as a profession, even “as a cause,” by these founders. They held that trained historians were indispensable as scholars and educators. These professors and archivists had mastered their craft through advanced education and only they could maintain high historical standards through continuing research, interpretation and publication. As was true in the

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founding of the American Historical Association in 1884, this concern over standards and professional boundaries meant distancing most amateur historians, librarians and school teachers, who were less well trained, poorly paid and mostly female. And it also meant that even well-trained women were marginal. The assumption was that white, Protestant men defined both the subject and the membership of the profession: It is not that women were explicitly barred—they certainly were not—but that they were less important, if not a distraction to the core mission of this enterprise. This marginalization was also true, in varying degrees, of other groups depicted as less crucial to the historical profession—African Americans, Jews, Catholics, and the descendants of certain European ethnic groups.<sup>2</sup> The first officers and program committees were all male. There was a brief mention that “Frances Dorrance was placed in charge of the arrangements and began work,”<sup>3</sup> but what exactly she did was not specified. It was clear that she was in a subordinate position. A network of committed scholars was forged seventy-five years ago and, it soon appeared, it would be, by and large, an old boys’ network.

A tour of the back issues of *Pennsylvania History* shows the many ways that women were marginalized in the early years of the organization. There were few women authors or reviewers, few reviewed books on women’s subjects and even fewer articles on women in the quarterly journal. Most female authors got published by writing about men. Ruth Mosler Kistler published an article on William Allen in July, 1934, A. Gertrude Ward wrote on John Ettwain in the October issue, and Dora Mae Clark analyzed the British treasury a year later. Only Judith Anderson’s article on “Anna Dickenson, Anti-Slavery Radical,” (July, 1936) bucked the trend. Those four were the only articles authored by women in the entire decade. Not reviewed in the earliest years of the journal were such classic titles as Mary Ritter Beard’s *America through Women’s Eyes* (1933), Mary Sumner Benson’s *Women in Eighteenth-Century America* (1935), or Elisabeth Anthony Dexter’s *Career Women of America, 1776–1840* (1950). One obvious sign of the pervasive gendered orientation of the organization was the title of the announcements section, initially compiled by S. K. Stevens, “Of Men and Many Things.” This striking display of masculine exclusivity first appeared in the July issue, 1938. The title lasted through the July 1949 issue. The more inclusive title of “Notes and Comments” thankfully took its place thereafter.

To some degree the contemporary definition of history’s scope shaped the journal in the earliest decades. History was conceived to be primarily about politics, policy, diplomacy, war, the economy and leadership. Women were

not included as subjects of historical inquiry because few women seemed to be obvious actors in these fields of human endeavor. But another factor in the scarcity of women as subjects or authors in *Pennsylvania History* may have been that the PHA was also a social group with a popular annual convention. Like other voluntary groups of the time, the PHA was clubby, and it was predominantly a men's club. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, publishers of the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, was an archive first and foremost and held no annual conference, so that sociability and raising "more enthusiasm" may have been less crucial to its existence. The *PMHB*, for this or perhaps for other reasons, had much less difficulty in finding female authors or subjects to include in its journal. Between 1932 and 1939, this rival journal published six articles about women, fourteen articles by women, and reviewed four books with women as the subjects. It was a record that should have put *Pennsylvania History* to shame with its single article about a woman and just four articles written by women in the same time period.

Things only got worse in *Pennsylvania History* in the 1940s: two women authors, one biography of a woman, and the script of a radio play about Lydia Darrach were all that appeared in this ten year period. In January of 1948, there was, surprisingly enough, a review of a book on Abigail Adams even though her connections to Pennsylvania were limited. This was not, however, a sign of a turnaround in attitude. In the entire 1950s there were but three articles about women. The journal was becoming more professional, articles were longer, and an interest in social history, especially in the arts and in religion, was emerging. Articles on Native Americans indicated a shift in at least one direction toward inclusiveness, but there was no sign that traditional gender patterns were about to change.

The tumultuous period of the mid-1960s and early 1970s brought innovative articles. Articles on labor history, African American history, social and quantitative history and more began to appear. Ira V. Brown's article on "The Women's Rights Movement in Pennsylvania, 1848-1873," (April, 1965), was the first time the journal published an article on women that was not a biography of some prominent and exceptional character.<sup>4</sup> This was soon followed by two articles that provided gendered analyses of early Pennsylvania. Jean S. Staub (in April, 1967) and Barbara Cunningham (in July, 1976) examined Benjamin Rush's and Henry Melchior Muhlenberg's views of female capacity and femininity. These were valuable contributions to the study of gender ideology although still male centered. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, articles on women were becoming common. Elinor F. Oakes

produced *Pennsylvania History*'s first article on women and the economy, "A Ticklish Business: Dairying in New England and Pennsylvania, 1750–1812," (July, 1980), but the rest of the 1980s was a pretty much of a washout—no article focused on women appeared from 1983 to 1993, even though women's history, gender history, and men's history were all hot topics in American history nationwide. There were only a few articles written by women. Except for Billy G. Smith's experimental primary source section, which published documents that illuminated men's and women's experiences, there was a retrograde character to the journal in those years. Several prominent women historians quit the organization or declined to serve because of the hostile atmosphere at meetings.

While *Pennsylvania History* retreated from the profession's inclusions of both women's history and women historians, the *PMHB* published a special "Women's History Issue" in January, 1983, an issue on "Black Leaders in Philadelphia," in January, 1989, that evenly balanced articles on women and men, and an issue on "Women in the Revolutionary Era" (April, 1991). The *William and Mary Quarterly* had produced an issue on "Studies in Gender" in January 1991. *Pennsylvania History* had retreated from the emergent concerns of the previous decade and failed to incorporate the challenging new directions that were transforming the discipline both in redefining the subjects of scholarly inquiry and in opening membership, leadership positions and influence to previously excluded groups.

Women began to make up a larger portion of the leadership of the PHA in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, reflecting changes in the profession and the coming of age of a new generation of historians, both men and women. Several women served as president of the organization, this author, Leslie Patrick and Rosalind Remer—pleasing Elizabeth M. Geffen, who had been the first female president back in 1981–84. Under the editorship of Michael Birkner and especially Bill Pencak, *Pennsylvania History* moved from retrograde to current in women's history. Aaron Fogelman edited the diary of a Moravian woman in April, 1994, breaking away from a long focus on English-speaking women. Alison Duncan Hirsch examined and pared the historical mythologizing of Gulielma Penn and Hannah Penn. Marie Lindhorst combined women's history and African American history in her study of Sarah Mapps Douglas and the Female Literary Association of the 1830s (summer, 1998); Jane Merritt provided a pathbreaking comparative study of Mahican, Delaware and German women (Autumn, 2000). *Pennsylvania History* is virtually the only scholarly journal regularly publishing in the fledgling field

of German American women's history. In addition to the previously cited works are Ruth Ann Denaci's examination of the captivity narrative of Marie Le Roy and Barbara Leininger, (Summer, 2007), Christine Hucho's analysis of Schwenkfelder women writers (Winter, 2001) and Beverly Smaby's article on female piety among the Moravians, (Special Edition, 1997). Sophisticated contributions to the literature on femininity, masculinity and gender found a home in *Pennsylvania History*.

Other breakthroughs followed both in the journal and in other publications. Elaine F. Crane edited a special issue on Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker. It was the first time the journal devoted so much space to women's history. The Association published Marion W. Roydhouse's *Women of Industry and Reform: Shaping the History of Pennsylvania, 1865–1940* in 2007. A companion volume on the earlier period is promised. Women have a more prominent place in the organization and in its chief publications than ever before.

For much of its history, the PHA was more reluctant than most other historical organizations to include women either in leadership positions or as subjects of historical inquiry. Patterns of behavior, once institutionalized, are difficult to change. The general absence of women makes for a brief gendered history of the organization. But starting in the 1990s, the traditional state of affairs began to change—although relics of the past occasionally still surface. The Pennsylvania Historical Association, its conferences and its publications are more inclusive than they have ever been, but the brief history also reveals that change is not unidirectional. The 1960s promised a broader intellectual base for the organization that petered out by the 1980s, perhaps reflective of national political trends. Now, well into the twenty-first century, it will continue to take commitment by researchers, editors, officers and the general membership to preserve the progress made so far.

## NOTES

1. Roy F. Nichols, "The Period of Our Origins," *Pennsylvania History* 1:1 (Jan. 1934), 47.
2. Joan Wallach Scott, "American Women Historians, 1884–1984," *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 178–198.
3. Ibid.
4. Even Elizabeth M. Geffin's "Philadelphia Protestantism Reacts to Social Reform," (April, 1963), had not included women, although she did include a lengthy discussion of African American religious leaders in the article.