

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND PUBLIC HISTORY IN PENNSYLVANIA

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The Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary

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hen I first began to think about the extent to which the practice of public history has been affected by historiographical shifts since the time of the Pennsylvania Historical Association's founding, I made what I soon realized was an erroneous assumption. We have long known that there is often a state of suspended animation that exists between major historiographical trends and the way history is taught in the schools and presented in textbooks. My assumption was that in looking at historical sites, museums and exhibits throughout the Commonwealth, I would find an analogous lag during which public historians and curators would struggle to keep up with current scholarship, or despite keeping up with it, would lack resources or direction to keep their exhibits, sites and museums historiographically up-to-date.

At a PHA annual meeting in Lebanon 15 years ago, Gary Nash exhorted us to pay attention to history from the ground up in our teaching of Pennsylvania history. It seemed to me that most of the academic historians in the room were already doing so, or at the very least, aware of the growing role of social history in the

PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY: A JOURNAL OF MID-ATLANTIC STUDIES, VOL. 75, NO. 3, 2008.
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college and university classroom. But since PHA has increasingly worked to broaden its focus and its constituencies to include public history and its practitioners, I found myself wondering how Gary's words were likely to be interpreted in the realm of public history.

I needn't have wondered. Social history and public history go hand-in-hand. This may be too obvious a point to belabor. But throughout the Commonwealth, in small town libraries and historical societies, in historic sites and museums, and even on the hundreds of blue and gold markers that dot the countryside and stand sentry on city streets, countless stories of history from the ground up are being told. Visitors and observers are learning the stories of people who were their forebears in a figurative and often literal sense, or possibly the people who were the enemies or oppressors of their forebears. Sometimes it seems that every community in Pennsylvania has a local historian who knows everything there is to know about canals and locks, or textiles, or anthracite, or religious sects, or small town economies, or local land transactions, or architecture, or glass-blowing, or *fastnacht* donuts, or furnaces, or steam engines, or mill design. These are precisely the stuff of which the social history of "ordinary" and laboring people is made. And in displays ranging from small panel exhibits featuring home-front Civil War photographs, to massive, interactive displays on the history of ketchup, we never lose sight of the people about whom these histories are told. Even in the most ambitious and well-funded exhibits, we can find ourselves coming away with a sense that it's far more important and interesting to understand how ketchup seeped into everyone's life—the making of it, the banging the bottom of the bottle for it, the eating of it, the drawing a weekly paycheck from it—than it was to understand the wealth it created for those who mainly invested and innovated in the stuff. Many Pennsylvania public history sites benefit from aid from and interaction with the influential and well-organized Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and the Pennsylvania Federation of Museums and Historical Organizations. These Commonwealth agencies have helped public history practitioners fine-tune their offerings and gain access to up-to-date methodologies. While it's undoubtedly true that in all areas of public history in Pennsylvania, choice of subjects and their treatment has evolved increasingly to emphasize the experiences of ordinary folk, Pennsylvania's public historians have been practicing social history for as long as they've been telling Pennsylvanians' stories.

Pennsylvania may be fully-stocked with practitioners of public, social history, but what happens when the history being presented is considered to be a national, political one? Even there we have some public history sites that have found ways to make the political seem so, well, personal. Anyone going to Dwight Eisenhower's farm outside of Gettysburg for an inside glimpse into the strategy and official work of the General and President may be disappointed contemplating 1950s dish-towels, upholstery and ashtrays, especially when fellow visitors are exclaiming over them, pointing out which ones they remember from their own grandmother's kitchen and dens. History becomes personal, there, too, and the weighty interpretation that some may require of an historic site is not particularly highlighted. And perhaps, after all, that's fitting for a place that served as a retreat and retirement idyll.

This leaves us to ponder the sites that are nationally-mandated "hallowed" spaces in Pennsylvania. Gettysburg comes first to mind, but also the mid-20th century-produced Independence Mall, and the National Park at Valley Forge. In her latest book, *The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, Drew Gilpin Faust makes the argument that the "work of death" that developed in the course of the Civil War led to a new understanding of the federal government as the sponsor for commemorative sites, particularly the much-needed national cemeteries—deeply and unmistakably stoic in design. Equally important perhaps, are the battle grounds, sites associated with bravery, sacrifice and anonymity, places that left exposed the shared pain under which Americans were staggering as they tried to cope with their extraordinary losses. Just as the cemeteries marked the sacrifice, the battlefields, long after battles ceased, became places where military history could be told and re-told and where a national historical consciousness would be formed. And in the case of Valley Forge, the story of sacrifice and an underdog Revolutionary army could be appreciated. Faust argues that for generations following the Civil War, Americans existed in a shadowed and haunted place, one made unrecognizable by trauma. Into this landscape and in this environment, the federal government, Faust argues, assumed unprecedented powers. This eventually came to include an assumption of the task of providing a national narrative in national parks. Americans in the 20th century would come to learn their history, guided by a narrative developed by a federal agency. A great many Americans have their first taste of history at these sites commemorating military engagement and maneuvers. For some it proves a powerful incentive to learn more, while others are left feeling that history is too somber and difficult an exercise to tackle.

It's little wonder then, that social historians have had trouble getting much of a foothold in historic sites that were meant to fulfill loftier aims. This issue has been at the core of the last twenty or so years of discussion among historians hoping to graft the stories of ordinary people onto the national, largely commemorative story. At times this might require importing local and personal history into the national realm, where the two can make uneasy interpretive neighbors, while at others it might be a matter of infusing the national story with social history methods. An example, much in the press lately, involves the re-design of Independence Mall and the interpretation of Washington's years in Philadelphia as the nation's first president. A creation of the mid-twentieth century, the Mall's original design called for the destruction of hundreds of nineteenth-century homes and businesses and deployed in their place a huge expanse of open concrete anchored by Independence Hall on the south and studded by fountains and a modernist building containing nothing but a disembodied and cunningly lit Liberty Bell. Those who observed that great forms of government always seemed to require monumental pieces of empty space to commemorate them might have been forgiven for thinking that Independence Hall was a Cold War American answer to Red Square.

In the 1990s, in an era of global "thaw" and partly as result of the power of social history in the public sphere, the National Park Service and local public and private partners embarked on an ambitious plan to re-humanize the Mall, landscape it with generous greenery and most notably, to reintroduce the original grid of small streets that were destroyed to create the monumental Mall. This plan was partially realized. The reintroduction of the grid of small streets was not ultimately carried through, except in vestigial ways that only urban designers might appreciate. And the events of 9-11 necessitated the installation of major security barriers, reducing available funds for green space and welcoming additions like an outdoor cafe. Still, the Liberty Bell was taken off-axis and placed in a new building designed to provide visitors with an interpretive experience informed by social history. And as of this writing, the security barriers have been reduced, the landscaping has resumed and the cafe has just opened.

Even since the planning for the new Mall began, social history has made further inroads into this national, commemorative site. While the house where Washington lived as President was destroyed before the creation of Independence Mall, it had been located immediately adjacent to the location of the new Liberty Bell Center. Now, the stories of the house's *other*

inhabitants are starting to be told. This is thanks to social historians and local activists who, against initial resistance from the National Park Service, have insisted on knowing more about the slaves who toiled for Washington in this place, a place where *state law* placed limits on slave ownership. Recent archaeology, undertaken by the National Park Service, has uncovered much of the house's outline and has engaged the public in the story of early American slavery on the very site where millions of visitors come to celebrate the history of American freedom and the concept of freedom, in general. The commemorative mandate of a federal agency is being stretched to subtler meaning and greater inclusion and the physical landscape of the place will increasingly reflect the power of social history.

I would argue that the inroads made by social history have positively affected the way in which the National Park Service acts as custodian of commemorative, national public history sites. However, anyone can develop an historic site and in this day of privatization, this is increasingly occurring. The National Constitution Center on Independence Mall, is not a museum run by the National Park Service—it is a private institution. Historians there have worked hard to take a social history approach to what has traditionally been seen as primarily a political story. The effort is ambitious and difficult and the results are sometimes clumsy and sometimes elegant, but inclusion is the key to the Center's interpretation and it's a story that can always, therefore, be refreshed and improved upon. And the interpretive debate between the primacy of the national narrative and the social one is embedded in the founding of the Center, so it will likely inform interpretive decisions for years to come.

The Constitution Center is a new institution faced with challenges that federally-run public history sites don't necessarily have, chief of which is the need to maintain high visitation—translated into revenue—to keep exhibits and programs fresh. This means that the Center needs to stay on top of current historiography and research, and to continually look for ways to reach visitors, not with platitudes, but meaningful content that will inspire thought—and repeat visitation. The more visitors come to expect an engaging experience, the higher the interpretive and experiential bar gets, and so do the stakes, as private enterprises enter the public history realm. Indeed, this will be a challenge for all private, public history sites—and more are on the way. A private museum about the American Revolution is planned for a site adjacent to Valley Forge National Park. If the planners of the proposed American Revolution Center offer a rich experience to visitors, shaped by

current scholarship and with themes that appeal to those seeking a direct pipeline to the past, the museum will be a welcome addition to public history in Pennsylvania. If instead, the museum's approach encompasses a whiggish, top-down narrative, it will be a step backward. The National Park Service opposes this plan for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that the new museum will be situated outside the National Park and part of a bigger tourism development, but also because it will simply have no control over the narrative, even to ensure that it is consistent with NPS interpretive goals for Valley Forge, which now embrace the social history of the Valley Forge encampment. So, it remains to be seen how this will ultimately play out. But the central irony is this: as social history and the story of inclusion have assumed an important place even in "hallowed" places like Independence Mall and Valley Forge, anyone can become a public history provider. Private developers can offer any interpretation they choose in "public history" settings. And now, initially resistant to the pull of social history in national, commemorative sites, the National Park Service finds itself in a strange new marketplace of public history. Perhaps Pennsylvania's rich array of public history sites devoted to the stories of ordinary people can help shape the debate in the coming years.