

**"THE YEAST FINALLY WORKED":
THE FOUNDING OF THE PENNSYLVANIA
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION IN 1932**

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Here we are in State College seventy-five years later. By now, you know we are here to mark the founding of the Pennsylvania Historical Association. But organizations, as Roy F. Nichols wrote in the very first issue of *Pennsylvania History*, "never burst into existence spontaneously; most of them have a long evolution." How was it, then, that historians gathered in State College in 1932—not once, but twice, in April and again in September—to create this Association?

It was certainly not from the lack of other institutions and organizations. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania existed from 1824, and the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society from 1879. Beginning with Luzerne County's Wyoming Historical and Genealogical Society in 1858, county groups emerged, especially during the last decades of the nineteenth century. In 1907, the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies was incorporated as a forum for these various county and local societies. The state government, meanwhile, established the Pennsylvania Historical Commission in 1913 to "mark and

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preserve Pennsylvania's antiquities and historical landmarks."¹ (These last two groups have since added "museums" to their portfolios, and we now know them as the Pennsylvania Federation of Museums and Historical Organizations and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.)

So why did people think we needed another organization in the state? According to Homer T. Rosenberger, who wrote a brief history of PHA in 1970, the story starts with casual hallway conversations between Roy F. Nichols of Penn and Lawrence Henry Gipson of Lehigh at the AHA annual meeting in 1928. (Let no one say this organization does not have distinguished founders! Nichols later won the Pulitzer Prize for his *Disruption of American Democracy* and Gipson garnered the same award for the 10th of his 15-volume *British Empire before the American Revolution*. They were arguably their generation's most incisive interpreters of the Civil War and the Revolution.)

While it would be convenient to imagine the association springing magically from two such giants in their fields, Nichols himself tells a more complex tale. (This is what historians are bound to do, isn't it—take a perfectly delightful apocryphal story and load it with complications?) I should insert here that Nichols is our primary source on the founders' motives, as he reveals them in a very short article in the first issue of *Pennsylvania History* and more completely in his autobiography, *A Historian's Progress* (1968). The archival record and two later histories—by Sylvester Stevens in 1952 and Homer Rosenberger in 1970—are useful on other matters, but add little about the reasons for our creation.²

To begin with, Nichols pushes the story back to 1925–26, the run-up to the sesquicentennial of the Declaration of Independence. Amid the planning for the celebration, there were one or two meetings about promoting the broader history of the commonwealth, but there were no results. Nichols does not say who met, or where they met, or what they were thinking because he himself was uninvolved, having only joined the Penn faculty in the fall of 1925. (It is worth noting that neither Nichols nor Gipson was a native Pennsylvanian. Nichols was from New Jersey and educated at Rutgers and Columbia; Gipson was born in Colorado, raised in Idaho, and educated at Idaho, Oxford, and Yale.)

Nichols suggests that he was more or less taunted into taking an interest in state history. While researching at the HSP, he often encountered Albert Cook Myers, a member of the PHC and president of the PFHS. Myers, at work on an edition of the William Penn papers, had never managed to finish

his Ph.D. work at Penn, and—so Nichols found out—liked to complain about Penn professors, especially that they thought themselves too important to take an interest in state and local history. Nichols found him a bit “exasperating.” But one day, Myers, in effect, “dared” Nichols—that’s Nichols’s word—to come to the next Federation meeting held at Valley Forge.³

Nichols went, and—these are his words, too—“gained a new and different historical interest.”⁴ He also met Julian Boyd, who had recently started working at the Wyoming Historical Society. Nichols and Boyd were given the task of surveying historians across the state “to discover what Pennsylvania history needed.”⁵ The questionnaire went out in the spring of 1928, and Boyd presented the findings at a Federation meeting in January 1929. The month before—the last week of December 1928—Nichols had presented a paper at the annual AHA meeting in Indianapolis. The AHA at the time was concerned about the lack of scholarly productivity among college professors living outside major cities. Nichols, using the results of the questionnaire, pointed to two reasons: the lack of readily available research materials and an “enforced isolation”—the lack of “real contacts with the rest of the historical world.”⁶ He proposed a focus on state and local history as a solution for the lack of close-at-hand sources. Solving the “enforced isolation” called for a statewide organization that would place a value on state history, provide a venue for historians to meet, and publish research on state and local topics.

This led to those hallway conversations with Gipson that Rosenberger mentioned. The question was, ‘How could they make this happen?’ The HSP was unlikely to be any help; it never met outside Philadelphia. When Nichols and Gipson returned to Pennsylvania, they tried first to get the Federation to change its constitution to allow membership by individuals and by academic departments. They were turned down flat, so that avenue was blocked. The state historical commission was active in its own way, but it could not be transformed into an independent association for individual historians either. There was nothing to be done except to start a new organization.

Nichols, Gipson, Boyd and their like-minded friends found a receptive audience. Out in Western Pennsylvania, Professor John Oliver at Pitt had landed a large grant for a Western Pennsylvania historical survey and brought in Solon J. Buck from Minnesota to run it. These were the early years of the Great Depression when American culture, seeking roots and stability, turned increasingly to local and regional themes, to folklore and history—the regionalism of Thomas Hart Benton and the American Scene painters; the localism of Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road*, Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, and

George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*; the WPA's Index of American Design and its Federal Music Project; and so on. Thus, the times were right; there was a receptive audience for local and state history.

As Nichols put it, "the yeast finally worked."⁷ Two Penn State professors—Asa Martin and Wayland Dunaway—offered their facilities in State College for a meeting on 29–30 April 1932. Seventeen people showed up. Tactically, Martin and Dunaway had been smart: they invited representatives of the Federation and the Historical Commission, and as a result the three organizations would become allies, not rivals. It was an interesting assemblage; in addition to Martin and Dunaway, there was Gipson, Boyd, Oliver, and Buck; Nichols enticed Arthur Bining to come with him from Penn; Paul Gates was there from Bucknell, and so were the Federation's Frances Dorrance, State Archivist Hiram Shenk, and the Department of Public Instruction's J. F. Broughler. Also present was C. B. Russell from Westminster, Robert Fortenbaugh from Gettysburg, two Lock Haven professors, C. M. Sullivan and H. J. Weber, and another Penn State man, B. M. Hermann.⁸

Paul Gates was appointed temporary secretary, and wrote the first lines in the minute book: "Recognizing the need for an active state-wide historical society which should appeal both to the professional and non-professional historians in Pennsylvania, Dr. Asa E. Martin and Dr. W. F. Dunaway of Pennsylvania State College and Dr. Solon J. Buck of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey decided to call a meeting of those interested in establishing such a society. The meeting was held at State College, April 29 and 30, 1932."⁹

The seventeen gathered at Martin's home on Friday evening and talked generally about their hopes. The goals were simple, yet important: to hold meetings around the state, to emphasize research, and to spread knowledge by publications and teaching. The results would be a sense of community among historians and enthusiasm for the commonwealth's history. They were careful not to duplicate others' work: there would be no headquarters building, no library or manuscript repository, and no full-time paid staff.

On Saturday morning, they discussed the need for bibliographic aids and lamented the "shameful neglect" of state records. After lunch, they visited the estate of Col. Theodore Davis Boal in nearby Boalsburg, and listened to him describe his Spanish relics. By Saturday evening, they were confident that they should move ahead, and they passed resolutions to call a bigger meeting in September. That done, they spent the remainder of the evening

exchanging information about the research they and their graduate students had underway.

The larger September meeting—a “convention” they called it—attracted a hundred people from across the state. Dorrance chaired the Committee on General Arrangements, which included responsibility for the program; Dunaway chaired the Committee on Local Entertainment (a much more evocative title than the bland “Local Arrangements” we use today). The Federation and the Historical Commission helped to get out the word, and the meeting, 15–17 September 1932, was—so the minutes attested—“of great success from every point of view; we had perfect weather, perfect entertainment, and an immensely interesting program.”¹⁰

Meeting in Old Main’s Little Theater and the Nittany Lion Inn, they heard papers on, among other topics, Indian Affairs in the Upper Ohio Valley, David Rittenhouse, the early iron industry, historical methodology, and Pennsylvania history in the college curriculum. The meeting’s structure was not too different from what we are enjoying this year. On Friday evening, after dinner, they agreed unanimously to organize the Pennsylvania Historical Association. Temporary officers were elected: the Hon. A. Boyd Hamilton, president; Roy F. Nichols, vice president; and Paul Gates, secretary. Hamilton appointed two committees: Solon J. Buck led one to write a constitution and Lawrence Henry Gipson another to organize the first annual meeting at Lehigh in April 1933. At that meeting in Bethlehem, the constitution was adopted, and the temporary officers properly elected to full terms (with Ross Pier Wright, an Erie business leader and director of the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, as treasurer). Arthur Bining was elected editor of *Pennsylvania History*, with authorization to begin publishing as soon as two hundred members were enrolled.

As I’m sure you are aware, we will be going to Bethlehem ourselves in October 2008 where Lehigh will host us once again, seventy-five years later. Just how much has changed is something we can look forward to discovering. Whether we can expect a repeat of the organ recital and a concert of Moravian music, I know not. Perhaps a dinner themed around ‘old Moravian’ recipes is possible, but if so, I can guarantee that it will cost more than 50 cents a plate, which was the charge for such a repast in 1933. Nor, do I think you should expect to pay only \$2.00 a night at the Hotel Bethlehem.

But this is getting a full year ahead of our story. Today we are focusing on our beginnings and our subsequent growth as an organization because, as Nichols recollected, “the venture prospered from the start.”¹¹ I wish that we

knew more about those early years, but the ironic truth is that historians are often less diligent than they might be about recording their own history. When Sylvester Stevens wrote his account of our past in 1952, he lamented the lack of "recollections of some of the founders and early leaders." Without them, he complained, "It is not always easy to warm records into a very thrilling narrative."¹² We have none of the founders among us this afternoon, but we do have John Frantz, whose participation extends back some forty years, more than half of the Association's seventy-five year life span. During those years, he has been involved as an assistant editor of *Pennsylvania History*, as a Council member, as secretary, business secretary, vice president, president—and this year he has co-chaired the local arrangements committee. There are few roles that he has not filled. And, we are now privileged to listen to some of his recollections.

NOTES

1. Homer T. Rosenberger, "A Magnificent Record—The Pennsylvania Historical Association's First Thirty-Seven Years," *Pennsylvania History*, 37 (January 1970), 2.
2. Roy F. Nichols, "The Period of Our Origins," *Pennsylvania History* 1 (January 1934): 47–48; Roy F. Nichols, *A Historian's Progress* (New York: Knopf, 1968), 110–17; S. K. Stevens, "A Brief History of the Pennsylvania Historical Association," unpublished, 1952; Rosenberger, op. cit., 1–18.
3. Nichols, *Historian's Progress*, 111.
4. Nichols, *Historian's Progress*, 111.
5. Nichols, *Historian's Progress*, 111.
6. Nichols, *Historian's Progress*, 111–14.
7. Nichols, *Historian's Progress*, 115.
8. PHA Minutes, 29–30 April 1932, PHA Papers, State Archives.
9. Rosenberger, 3.
10. On this meeting, see *Program of the Pennsylvania Historical Convention, September 15, 16, and 17, 1932* and *Summary of the Proceedings of the Pennsylvania Historical Convention*. PHA Papers, State Archives.
11. Nichols, *Historian's Progress*, 115.
12. Stevens, 1.