

A WORD FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE
PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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When I was asked if I would consider standing for President of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, several emotions washed over me. Among them was pleasure and delight to be so honored, but also panic to assume such an important position of a valuable institution. I believe very, very strongly that all Pennsylvanians should have access to their own past. The Association has the opportunity and the duty to provide intellectual leadership and good history. As it works with other groups and state bureaus to promote an understanding of our past, we can help make that past part of our everyday lives, whether a student in school, a picnicker at a state park, an architectural buff at Falling Water, or a historian examining the remains of the colonial frontier.

In 1988, I wrote a guest editorial for the sadly passed Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies. As an immigrant New Zealander, I marveled that the more I learned about American history, the more I understood my own historical roots. Coming from a country much like the American provincial past, we had British institutions, wanted English approval, and knew we were considered “mere colonials;” however, as we struggled to define our own nationalism, we believed that we were superior

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in our egalitarianism and hardiness. Our past shapes us, but for me, local and state history is particularly fascinating in its daily immediacy. Knowing more of my own “state” history has given me perspective in writing about the American experience.

Not surprisingly then, I began the process of becoming a Pennsylvanian by exploring what was, to me, an astonishingly long history (compared to the young country of my birth, where my ancestors arrived in Scottish ships in 1848 in the first wave of British settlements). Be it interviewing one of the members of the artists’ colony of the 1920s in Bucks County or walking the battlefields of Gettysburg, I have had a wonderful education in the years since.

Indeed, one of the reasons that I first became involved with the Pennsylvania Historical Association was because I realized that going to the annual conferences was a wonderful way to see the state—to drive its roads, to soak in the rising ridges and mountains and great swaths of green and fertile farms, and to explore the coal towns. As important, the conferences were also opportunities to meet historians and teachers from across the state. It has been an enormous pleasure to learn what people are doing in writing and promoting the history of Pennsylvania. At every meeting I have met wonderful people who have shared their work, introduced me to their colleagues, and become good friends with an openness that characterizes the state itself, where immigrants have been central to its historical development. I look forward to meeting even more of you and to supporting you as best I can in your endeavors.