REPORT ON THE ANNUAL MEETING

THE FAMILIAR, THE REVISED, AND
THE NEW: A VIEW FROM THE 77TH ANNUAL
CONFERENCE OF THE PENNSYLVANIA
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION, BETHLEHEM,
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Judith Ridner
2008 Program Committee Chair
Muhlenberg College

The approximately one-hundred-twenty registrants at the PHA's 77th Annual Meeting at Hotel Bethlehem returned to familiar ground in October. Bethlehem, as many readers of this journal know, has hosted other recent PHA conferences. But this one was a bit different. 2008 was the 75th anniversary of the organization's first annual meeting, which was also held in Bethlehem at Lehigh University in April 1933. In this way, then, returning to Bethlehem honored the PHA and the participants at that first meeting, including the forty-six men and women (probably most of them wives of the presenters) who stood outside Lehigh University's Packard Hall for a commemorative photo that spring (this photo was reproduced in this year's conference program).

Yet, although the meeting's setting was the same one as 1933 (albeit headquartered at Hotel Bethlehem rather than Lehigh University), the conference program was not. Much has changed about the study of Pennsylvania history since 1933 and the
Program Committee, working cooperatively with the Local Arrangements Committee, sought to emphasize that fact. The two committees worked actively to plan a conference highlighting just how significantly Pennsylvania history has shifted in the intervening seventy-five years. To us, that meant revisiting traditional but undeniably significant Pennsylvania history topics like the Seven Years’ War, the American Revolution, and the Civil War, as well as stories of Pennsylvania’s German and Quaker populations, and labor history topics like mining and steel to reveal the new questions scholars ask of these topics. More significant, we wished to highlight how new, or more recent kinds of history—including public history, women’s history, Native American history, and African-American history, among others—have revolutionized the study of Pennsylvania’s past by opening up new topics of inquiry and sources for Pennsylvania historians to research.

To that end, with generous support from Lehigh University’s Harmon Civil War Lecture Series fund, the conference began with an evening plenary session with Gettysburg College Civil War historian, Gabor Borritt, and his son, a documentary filmmaker. Entitled “A Hungarian Historian, Abraham Lincoln, and the Gettysburg Address,” the session highlighted the intersections among biography, history, and filmmaking. Its focus, the viewing of a thirty-minute excerpt from his son’s film, explored how Borritt’s (his father’s) experiences growing up in wartime Hungary under the Nazis shaped his fascination with Abraham Lincoln and the American Civil War. It also drew parallels between the total war Borritt witnessed in his homeland and the mass devastation of the Civil War that he has spent his career studying.

On Friday morning, conference participants reassembled at the Hotel Bethlehem, for another plenary session, this one addressing the more familiar theme of Pennsylvania’s role as a political keystone. This roundtable discussion, which was moderated by Michael Birkner of Gettysburg College, and included comments by Jack Bauman, David Schuyler, Ken Heinemann, Michael Young, and pollster-professor G. Terry Madonna, asked the audience of fifty-plus members to consider: is Pennsylvania still a keystone? Panelists argued yes to this question, but reminded the audience that being a keystone in 2008 means sharing the burden of the many social, economic, educational, and energy-related issues confronting so many Americans today. Being a keystone is no longer a privilege, therefore, but an obligation.

The conference continued with eleven concurrent, ninety-minute sessions on Friday and an additional six on Saturday. These sessions, which included
a wide-range of scholars, museum professionals, and public historians from colleges, universities, and research institutions in Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic, the Midwest, and Europe, formed the heart of the conference. Like the opening plenaries, they also highlighted the familiar and the new in Pennsylvania history. A session on “The Lives and Experiences of Pennsylvania’s Miners,” for example, targeted a topic of long-standing interest to Pennsylvania historians. Yet, it did so in new ways by looking at such issues as medical self-help among miners in the anthracite region. Similarly, an afternoon session on the 1758 Forbes Campaign to the Ohio revisited a well-known event in the state’s colonial history. Here, too, however, the young scholars on this panel encouraged audience members to rethink this event by revealing how militia leaders like John Armstrong, or the Cherokee warriors who accompanied it, influenced this expedition in meaningful ways. Panelists in a Saturday session, “New Perspectives on Pennsylvania’s Germans,” likewise utilized new materials, in one case a little-known collection at the Pennsylvania German Society, to ask new questions about some members’ flirtation with Adolph Hitler during World War II.

Equally significant, concurrent sessions steered conference participants towards the exploration of topics that were either entirely unknown or overlooked by historians in 1933. Several panels on Friday and Saturday, for example, highlighted the emerging field of public health history, as well as the continuing study of Pennsylvania’s environment. A number of other panels explored how Pennsylvania’s cultural diversity affected its history. Two papers in a Saturday morning session on the Delaware Indians, for instance, examined these native peoples’ interpretation of the Walking Purchase of 1737 as well as the ways they modified their family lives to accommodate to the changing social circumstances of post-contact Pennsylvania. Other panels and papers explored African-American history in Pennsylvania from the early republic through the twentieth century. Papers by Kimberly Sambol-Tosco and Susan Clemens-Bruder, for example, assessed how African-American daily experiences, including their family, work, and church lives, shaped the broader Pennsylvania communities of which they were integral parts. And on Saturday, Roberta Meek challenged her audience to consider how Civil Rights activism, though less confrontational than other places in the urban north, still happened in subtle but important ways in eastern Pennsylvania cities such as Allentown. Other papers and sessions examined the development and influence of the AME church and the underground railroad in Pennsylvania. Together, these presentations moved conference participants
towards a more comprehensive understanding of African-American life and experience in Pennsylvania. Equally significant was the panel on “Pennsylvania’s Women at Home and Abroad,” which again served as a powerful reminder of how the study of Pennsylvania history has changed since 1933. Women, these panelists reminded their audience, were not simply contributors to Pennsylvania’s development in the twentieth century; they, like its native peoples and African-American residents, were critical players in the state’s development. Indeed, Pennsylvania’s women even influenced global communities when they went abroad.

Then, too, some concurrent sessions also focused on the new (or newer) methods scholars use to interrogate Pennsylvania’s history. Deborah Arnold and Jane Pollini’s presentation on using film as a tool to document local history offered audience members a how-to approach about preserving and disseminating their own stories of Pennsylvania’s past. The Friday afternoon walking tour of South Bethlehem, hosted by Lehigh University’s Kim Carrell-Smith, took an even more hands-on approach. Touring south Bethlehem’s working class and elite neighborhoods, its ethnic churches, and its businesses gave tour participants a tangible sense of how the once powerful industrial giant Bethlehem Steel shaped a community and the daily lives of its inhabitants. Other papers and panels modeled other kinds of public history for audience members. A Saturday panel, for example, offered an annual review of the PHMC Scholars-in-Residence program. Panelists discussed their research and its connections to various PHMC collections. Two papers in another panel that day, “Creating Public Memories of Pennsylvania’s Many Pasts,” highlighted how former mine sites have become tourist attractions and what that means for the collective memories Pennsylvanians have of their state’s past. On Friday afternoon, meanwhile, the McNeil Center for Early American Studies seminar engaged its audience in an interactive, seminar-style discussion of Patrick Spero’s paper, “The Imperial Crisis on the Pennsylvania Frontier: Race, Riot, and Revolution.” Although the McNeil Center seminar is not a new addition to PHA conferences, their seminar-style discussions of pre-circulated essays remain an innovative alternative to traditional, conference-style reading of papers.

In-between these concurrent sessions there were several interesting luncheon and dinner addresses that were also intended to develop to conference themes. At the Friday luncheon banquet the crowded dining room of the Hotel Bethlehem was engaged by Howard Gillette of Rutgers University, Camden, who spoke about the ongoing efforts by a local group
of scholars, activists, and politicians to preserve the remaining historical structures at Bethlehem Steel so that they might be opened to the public for interpretation of eastern Pennsylvania’s industrial past. Having faced numerous obstacles along the way, Gillette offered a cautionary tale. Preservation of industrial sites like Bethlehem Steel is not easy, he suggested. Yet it is a worthwhile endeavor if we are to retain our memories of the state’s unique industrial heritage. That evening, at Lehigh’s beautiful Mountaintop Campus with its stunning views of the Lehigh Valley, banquet speaker Peter Cole of Western Illinois University offered a similar cautionary tale, but of a different subject. Cole, whose work focuses Philadelphia dockworkers and particularly the history of Local 8 of the Industrial Workers of the World, cautioned his audience not to forget the IWW. Because Local 8 was the most racially inclusive labor union of the early twentieth century, he argued, it has much to teach us about racial politics today. To forget or misunderstand its history, therefore, is to miss key lessons applicable to today’s racial, economic, or social climate. Finally, the conference wrapped up with an engaging and equally cautionary Saturday luncheon address at the Hotel Bethlehem by Nicole Eustace of New York University, which was sponsored by the PHA’s Committee on Women and Minorities. Eustace, the author of the recently published *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution*, reminded a small but attentive audience that we overlook the history of emotion at our peril as scholars. Indeed, understanding Pennsylvania’s early history, she argued forcefully, depends in part on coming to terms with the emotions that drove its participants. Emotions, after all, though shaped by gender, class, and culture in their expression, are also remarkably inclusive. Everyone experiences them. Thus, to fully understand what the American Revolution meant in Pennsylvania or elsewhere in the middle Atlantic demands that we understand not just what people thought, but what they felt. To understand Pennsylvania’s history, in short, means accounting for the multiple perspectives of its many inhabitants.

In sum, much has changed about the PHA and Pennsylvania history since that first group of scholars met at Lehigh back in 1933. The participants have changed. Indeed, as the names of this year’s conference program attest, the profession now includes many female scholars (and not just the wives of scholars). It also includes many scholars of color. Equally important, the subjects scholars of Pennsylvania history study have altered too. Events like the Seven Years’ War, the American Revolution, and the Civil War remain central to the field, as do studies of Pennsylvania’s German and
Quaker communities. Yet the questions scholars ask of these topics have shifted, revealing understudied dimensions of these familiar fields of inquiry. Pennsylvania history has been revolutionized too by the new fields of inquiry that have arisen since 1933, and especially since the 1960s and 1970s. The new social history, the new labor history, women’s history, African-American and Native American history, and public history have all made their presence felt in the study of Pennsylvania’s past. And as the paper presentations at this year’s conference suggest, these new topics have reshaped the way we think about Pennsylvania and its peoples. To be sure, from the time of its founding until the present day, Pennsylvania was and remains a multi-faceted place populated by diverse peoples with differing needs and expectations. In this way, Pennsylvania remains perhaps not so much a keystone as a crucible for better understanding the processes, peoples, and events that shaped the larger American history.