SAVING THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Karen Ramsburg
With Introductory Remarks by Patrick Spero and Nathan Kozuskanich

EDITOR’S NOTE: Karen Ramsburg has been at the forefront of the drive to save the William Smith House in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. Patrick Spero and Nathan Kozuskanich introduce the importance of Smith and the Black Boys for understanding the American Revolution, followed by a brief excerpt from chapter 2 of Ramsburg’s book Smith Rebellion 1765 Gives Rise to Modern Politics, published by iUniverse. Readers interested in participating in saving the Smith House, or seeking more information, should go online to smithrebellion1765.com.

THE WILLIAM SMITH HOUSE: ORGANIZING THE FRONTIER IN THE EIGHTEENTH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

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On March 6, 1765, a pack train of at least eighty horses carrying £30,000 of goods approached Sideling Hill, a small Appalachian ridge in southwestern Pennsylvania.1 The train was on its way to Fort Pitt, where George Croghan, a leading diplomatic figure in this corner of the British empire, planned to use some of...
these goods to negotiate a peace treaty with the Shawnee Indians and thus formally end Pontiac’s War. Croghan may have had other intentions for the trade goods, too. Since the beginning of hostilities in 1763, imperial regulations banned trade between Great Britain and warring Indians. Strong if not explicit evidence suggests that Croghan hoped to use a portion of these goods to flood the reopened market as soon the treaty closed, making a huge profit for himself and his investors.

The entourage did not travel comfortably. Heading west on Forbes Road and other, smaller country roads, the horses and men certainly felt the winter’s wear under their feet. But bad roads were not the real problem. As soon as the convoy crossed the Susquehanna River, they began to encounter hostility from colonists. Word traveled ahead of the slow-moving caravan, and opposition to it grew the further the traders proceeded. Near Fort Littleton, William Duffield, a prominent preacher, pleaded with the merchants to halt, warning that they faced a grave threat if they pursued their westward path. Duffield’s prediction came true at Sideling Hill, as a band of men led by James Smith attacked and burned the cargo.

British officials viewed this audacious act as an attack upon the king himself and demanded that the parties involved be brought to justice. Local settlers, on the other hand, considered the act just. They believed that the cargo contained weapons that the Indians planned to use to begin “a third Indian war.” They also opposed reopening trade because the Shawnees had not yet returned their friends and family taken as prisoners of war. Far from undermining the king’s authority, they asserted that their actions protected the empire and its members. In time, roving bands composed of like-minded settlers patrolled the roads, inspected all goods traveling west for “warlike stores,” and issued passports to traders whose merchandise cleared their searches. Self-appointed inspectors included the local justice of the peace, William Smith. Smith also used his official capacity to defend the ad hoc inspection regime as a legal way to enforce imperial regulations and to protect the empire. When British officials like General Thomas Gage heard of these acts, they grew even more enraged at what they considered a usurpation of imperial authority.

Events began to spin out of control as imperial officials and local residents continued to clash. Lieutenant Charles Grant, the commander of Fort Loudon, sent a group of soldiers into nearby settlements to find and arrest the destroyers of the goods, who now called themselves the Brave Fellows or the Black Boys. The local community rejected the army’s attempt to enforce law, arguing that any arrests had to come from civil rather than military
authority—in other words, had to come from Justice of the Peace William Smith. Grant continued to pursue the guilty. Soon both sides exchanged fire. At one point, James Smith and others captured Grant, tied him to a tree, and threatened his life. The Black Boys besieged Fort Loudon twice and demanded that the army stop harassing their efforts and return guns seized from local residents during the hunt for the Black Boys. Throughout the conflict, the Black Boys used the house of William Smith as their headquarters, calling it “Fort Smith.”

The fighting eventually ended in November 1765. The inspection regime had lost steam over the summer after the crown officially reopened trade with Indians. The British army still retained the guns seized in the spring and that fact riled the local community. In early November the Black Boys laid siege to Fort Loudon in an effort to recapture their property. After two days of incessant firing, Grant acceded to the Black Boys’ demands and gave the guns to a local magistrate, who presumably returned them to their owners. Throughout the 1760s and probably into the 1770s, groups opposed to various government policies and actions continued to form in the region, wreaking havoc for both colonial and imperial officials trying to maintain order. In his memoirs published in 1799, James Smith related the story of one of these later groups raiding a British fort. “This, I believe, was the first British fort in America, that was taken by what they called American rebels,” he declared.

Over a decade ago, I began researching the politics of the Pennsylvania frontier. When I began, the Blacks Boys’ story—so fantastic that the limited space here cannot convey its drama or do justice to its significance—was unknown to me. I knew of the Paxton Boys, the group who massacred the Conestoga Indians in 1763 and then mobilized a massive march on Philadelphia. Everyone seemed to know of them. The Paxton Boys receive our attention because of the gruesome deed they committed and because they aimed their political ire at the legislature and marshaled their arguments in print. Their actions had a palpable effect on history. The unpunished violence of the Paxton Boys led the Quaker Party to petition the crown to seize control of the colony’s government. Their ill-timed actions reconfigured politics in the colony in the years before the American Revolution. Benjamin Franklin and Joseph Galloway, the Speaker of the Assembly, both lost their elections in 1764, and the mobilization of the frontier helped lay the foundation for a Presbyterian Party that seized control of the revolutionary government in 1776. The ouster of Franklin from the assembly reverberated throughout
the imperial crisis, as Franklin left for London and represented the colonies’ cause to Parliament. How different would American history be had Franklin not been in London? How different would Franklin have been had he stayed in Philadelphia? What would have happened if the crown took control of Pennsylvania and, most probably, made Franklin the royal governor?

The Black Boys, on the other hand, seem to have had little effect on the course of history. Their rebellion appears short-lived and of a purely local nature. It petered out, and their legacy, likewise, seems insignificant. Part of the problem is that the Black Boys took issue with imperial institutions far removed from Philadelphia and left their records in manuscripts that are now scattered in various archives. The bulk of the records relating to the Black Boys rest in the assorted volumes of Pennsylvania History, with fragments strewn in manuscript collections at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania State Archives in Harrisburg, and the Thomas Gage Papers at the Clements Library at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. I wanted to piece together all of these fragments, believing that this story once compiled would reveal a crisis of empire as significant as the better-known rebellions happening further east. I also hoped to find hidden collections in underutilized archives, so I emailed all of the county archives in western Pennsylvania to see if they had any documents on the Black Boys. That outreach began my association with the William Smith House.

Most county archives responded to my request in the negative. But Glenn Cordell of the Fulton County Historical Society, while letting me know that they did not have any documents from the era, did something more: he asked me to visit McConnellsburg (the town that sprung up from the settlements near which the Black Boys were active) to see if I could help locate the site of the initial attack on the pack train on Sideling Hill. It turns out that this question had long fascinated both Glenn and Perry Nelling, a resident of neighboring Mercersburg. Perry had amassed a huge collection of Black Boys material and had his own theories about where the rebellion occurred. They hoped that my research would help add some missing pieces. Glenn promised a place to stay, a tour, and a hike on Sideling Hill. I could not say no.

I no longer recall when exactly I visited Glenn. I do remember it being chilly. Maybe it was in March, right around the time of the Black Boys’ first attack, but my wife, Laura, who joined me on this adventure, insists it was the fall. On my own (much easier) trek west, I remember wondering what type of reception awaited me. As Laura and I drove into Glenn’s driveway, our concerns were put to rest. Glenn lives in a well-manicured
nineteenth-century stone farmhouse that exudes warmth and hospitality. It was a perfect place to commune with the past. As I think back on it now, I have some recollection of frost-covered windowpanes, but that picturesque image could just be a trick of my memory, a small detail added to reflect how wonderful the stay was.

After we arrived in the evening, Glenn outlined our ambitious plans for the next day and we turned in. We woke early and set off. Our day began with a tour of the surrounding area. Glenn showed me Bloody Run, a river whose name comes from fighting during the Seven Years’ War. We drove south, near the Maryland border, and he told me about Confederate troops raiding McConnellsburg during the Civil War. Next, we traveled east, across a ridge, toward Mercersburg, where Fort Loudon sat and William Smith lived. At the base of the mountain, Glenn took a left into a state park and showed me a huge grey stone monument in the shape of a pyramid. It was the birthplace of James Buchanan. The depth of history packed into this small corner of the state took me aback. But then, border regions often produce rich and complex histories—and unusual individuals.

Our tour then shifted to the Black Boys. We picked up Perry Nelling and headed to Fort Loudon, where the Black Boys had besieged the British in 1765. The fort sits a few miles out of town, surrounded by open space, farms, and houses with acreage. Several years ago—maybe even two decades ago—local residents discovered the old postholes from the fort and began to reconstruct its walls. On the day we visited, a local group of Boy Scouts had camped out in the fort. After introducing me to the Scouts, the group leader—I assume a father of one of the boys—recounted the story of the Black Boys to his pack. Impromptu and unscripted, he displayed a detailed knowledge of the incident. The memory of the Black Boys was very much alive in this man, and he had seized the opportunity to pass it onto the next generation. He also offered an interpretation of why the rebellion occurred. The conflict, he argued, was over gun rights. Easterners, he told the boys, were trying to take guns away from the Black Boys. They laid siege to Fort Loudon to take back their rightful property. On some level, he was right. His criticisms of easterners and their attempted impositions would have resonated with the Black Boys. Although certainly anachronistic and lacking a larger contextualization—the reason the guns were seized was because the owners had used them to defy British authority—his analysis was nonetheless as revealing about political tensions within Pennsylvania today as the Black Boys were in the 1760s.
Just outside the fort, a white, wood-framed home held a small museum that included a wax replica of James Smith. The Black Boys’ legacy, if overlooked by academic historians, thrived locally, and it mattered. Nathan Kozuskanich’s essay (below) addresses the Scout leader’s argument. I suspect the Scout leader would agree with much of what Kozuskanich has to say.

Next, Glenn and Perry took to me to Perry’s childhood home. It was, he claimed, the house of William Smith, the brother-in-law of James Smith and the justice of the peace who helped organize the Black Boys. The house had numerous additions and, frankly, I had no idea if it even had a colonial core. We could only walk around the outside because it was occupied and the residents were not in. But Perry assured me that it was Smith’s home and that he had discovered a stone in its foundation with “WS” carved into it. For a historian trained to question received wisdom and familiar with countless homes that claim to have had George Washington as a guest, I politely took Perry at his word though I was privately very skeptical.

We ended the day with a hike on Sideling Hill, searching for the elusive site of the initial Black Boys attack. It was a small hill, but part of a big woods, and we had little idea where to go. My documents provided little specific information about where the attack happened, and we were not even sure about where roads and paths ran back in the 1760s. I do not even recall how we ended up hiking where we did. We walked through the woods, and turned over some stones and logs, but we did not find any remnants of the Black Boys. We did find good company, though, and, for me at least, a much better understanding of the past and its peoples.

The trip stayed alive in my memory as I developed my dissertation, though I never found a way to mention it in my work. Unfortunately, you cannot cite the subtle type of influence such experiences have on one’s thinking. Nonetheless, it is there. But as I completed my work and moved on with my career, it did begin to recede.

That is, until I received a phone call from a number I did not recognize sometime in the spring of 2009. I almost never answer such calls, but I did take this one. On the other end was the excited voice of a man from Mercersburg who told me that the local fire department had purchased William Smith’s house with the sole intention of bulldozing it in order to expand the department’s capabilities. He had heard that I studied the Black Boys’ Rebellion and hoped that my research could help them protect the house. I thought of what the house looked like when I saw it and told him...
that he would have to prove that the house I saw—which to me looked more like an old nineteenth-century home with twentieth-century additions—was in fact William Smith’s house. Over the course of the next year, my skepticism faded, as archaeologists, architectural historians, and some good legal research convinced me that the home was on property owned by William Smith and that the core structure—hidden behind years of improvement—likely dated to the late-colonial era.

Living and working in Philadelphia, I never got to participate in the events that unfolded in Mercersburg, events that Karen Ramsburg relates in her essay and in her book *Smith Rebellion 1765 Gives Rise to Modern Politics*. To quickly summarize, a local community organization formed to halt the fire department’s plan to turn the house into a driveway. The community members not only wanted to preserve the house’s legacy, but they also wanted to build the community by turning the house into a museum dedicated to the Black Boys’ Rebellion. They hoped it would be part of a larger initiative to rebuild Mercersburg’s downtown.

For over a year, they fought to save the house from demolition. I watched it all unfold from afar, reading coverage in regional media outlets, receiving email updates, and following the Smith House’s website. It seemed strangely similar to how I studied the Black Boys—from the distance of time, I learned about their doings through newspaper accounts, correspondence, and other materials. And what I saw happening in the twenty-first century community seemed eerily reminiscent of how the Black Boys had used the house in the eighteenth century. I saw twenty-first-century Pennsylvanians organizing around the William Smith House to challenge a government organization that seemed to ignore community values.

There was more to it than that. The movement to save the Smith House may have been decidedly local, but its vision was expansive and ambitious. Those trying to preserve the Smith House did not want to just protect some old pieces of stone. Instead, they wanted to elevate public consciousness about the Black Boys, to transform knowledge of it from a piece of local lore to a story that is interwoven into how we conceive the founding of the nation. James Smith and his comrades would have agreed with their interpretation.

I have to admit, I am a bit skeptical about their new undertaking, too. The traditional narrative of the American Revolution—one beginning with the Stamp Act and one largely involving events in urban seaports like Boston and Philadelphia—seems a hard one to break. I was proven wrong about the Smith House once before, though. I hope I am again.
When James Madison convinced the first Congress to turn its attention to drafting the bill of rights that had been promised to anti-Federalist factions in Virginia and New York, he admitted that such amendments were not “essential to the federal constitution.” In fact, he believed once bills of rights were established in all the states and the federal government, Americans would soon discover that “some of them are rather unimportant.” If only Madison could see the millions of pages modern Americans have dedicated in law and history journals to discussing and debating the meaning of amendments he thought at best would have “a salutary tendency” on government!

Of course, for many more Americans who were not James Madison and his Federalist friends, the Bill of Rights was an essential barrier against the potential abuses of the federal government established under the Constitution in 1787. In Pennsylvania the radical Whigs who overthrew the colonial Quaker government and drafted the first state constitution in 1776 largely became the anti-Federalists who unsuccessfully tried to thwart ratification and then threw their weight behind the Bill of Rights compromise. These men, largely but not exclusively from the western parts of the state, have enjoyed notoriety once again for those seeking to divine the original meaning of the Second Amendment. Although dismissed in their day as potential rebels such as those who followed Daniel Shays in Massachusetts, in conservative circles they have become the gatekeepers of the true meaning of the right to bear arms. In the majority opinion for District of Columbia v. Heller, the landmark 2008 case that explicitly recognized for the first time a federal, individual
right to have guns outside of militia service, Justice Antonin Scalia gave the words in Robert Whitehill’s “Dissent of the Minority” equal importance with Madison’s and James Wilson’s when determining the meaning of the Second Amendment. This, of course, would have blown all three of their minds.

While we (or perhaps just I) may disagree with the ways Pennsylvania’s history has been employed in legal scholarship, such attention to men like Whitehill proves what many historians have known for some time: that Pennsylvania’s western history is a key element to understanding American history. Indeed, it is essential that we integrate William Smith and his Black Boys into the largely eastern and urban narratives we have told about the Revolution. As Patrick Griffin argues, fully understanding the Revolution means recovering the world of William and James Smith and those like them. While Pennsylvania’s earliest historians found the birth of democracy on the unruly western frontier, more recently scholars have found that democracy was tamed on these same lands following the Revolution. To be sure it is more comfortable to consider eastern urban class conflict, or rhetoric and ideology, as causes of the Revolution rather than the racial violence that marred the West during and after the French and Indian War. But as unsavory as the James Smiths of the past are to our modern sensibilities, they played a crucial role as the voice of dissent during America’s founding.

Although westerners were largely the losers of the Revolution, damned as white savages before and whiskey rebels after, in Pennsylvania they took control of the government in 1776 and issued the most radical constitution of the day. Their version of democracy was informed by their experience and thus they demanded that all who enjoyed the benefits of civil society contribute equally to its defense. They opened the vote to most white men while through oaths and test acts shut out the pacifist Quakers and Tories they considered inimical to ends of government. John Adams abhorred the new constitution as “wretched,” but we should not be so eager to dismiss it as he was. Perhaps because James Wilson rewrote the constitution in 1790 to be more in line with Federalist principles, the 1776 constitution has been largely relegated to the ideological trash heap of the Revolution as unworkable and idealistic—much the same fate as the Articles of Confederation. But James Smith (a delegate to the state constitutional convention) is part of the complicated and messy history of the Revolution and its aftermath, something we are only just starting to appreciate. Indeed, the successes and failures of the William and James Smiths of the past give us a better understanding of the successes and failures of the Revolution itself.
NOTES


3. Griffin’s specific example is Tom Quick, a ruthless “Indian killer,” but the point remains the same. See Patrick Griffin, *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007).


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Karen Ramsburg

The following letter from William Pencak, professor of history and Jewish studies at Penn State University, appeared in the Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, *Public Opinion*.

January 5, 2010

Dear Sir or Madam:

I recently learned that some citizens of Mercersburg are trying to save the house of Justice William Smith. It is not only the most important historical site in Mercersburg, but probably the most important historical site related to the American Revolution in Pennsylvania west of the Susquehanna River.

Why do I say this? Here, the Black Boys met in 1765 to prevent the British from supplying the Indians with trading goods, which included weapons that could be used to attack the frontier. They eventually drove the British out of Fort Loudon and later Fort Bedford in the first military resistance against the Mother Country prior to the American Revolution.
We don’t remember the Black Boys because unlike Lexington and Concord, their actions did not lead to widespread support from all the colonies. But we should. In 1775, the Pennsylvania riflemen who comprised the Black Boys would be among the first men recruited by Congress to aid the New Englanders as they camped outside Boston following the Battle of Bunker Hill. General William Thompson, commander of the Pennsylvania Rifles in the Revolution, was a leader of the Black Boys as well. Not only were the frontiersmen who met at Mercersburg the first to rise up against the British, they were among the first, and the best, who participated in and won the Revolution. Their experiences at the Smith House explain why they were so prominent in the cause of America.

What surprises me the most is that the Mercersburg Fire Company is the group that wants to demolish the building. If anyone in modern America can be compared to the Minute Men of 1776, it is the volunteer firemen who come to aid their communities in times of distress. They are the successors of the Black Boys, and ought to be at the front of the effort to preserve, not to obliterate, their memory.

I first learned about the Smith House in August, 2009, over coffee with a friend—that the house was located next door to the fire department, which had purchased the property to raze for a parking lot. A week later, a group of concerned citizens met, and we were introduced to historian Patrick Spero’s University of Pennsylvania dissertation, “Creating Pennsylvania: The Politics of the Frontier and the State, 1682–1800” (2009), from which we learned about the important role the house and Smith’s Rebellion played in our nation’s history.

What attracted me to Justice William Smith and the Black Boys was the fact that these ordinary citizens exercised their right of self-defense during a brutal war with the Indians, when government was so incompetent that people were left to fend for themselves. These hardy Scots-Irish immigrants came to America in search of opportunity. To knock down the house that symbolized their American Dream, where the ideas of true American patriots gave rise to the very fabric of our nation, seemed wrong.

The battle to save the Smith House took eighteen months and consisted of many twists and turns. In September 2009, about ten or so Mercersburg residents formed the Committee to Save the Justice William Smith House, Inc., and began trying to get the house on the Historic Register. Representative Bill Shuster stated that he would help us get funding if we could secure
its placement on the National Register. But when the folks from the Pennsylvania Historic Museum Commission (PHMC) came to look at the house, we were told that because of renovations, such as an 1820 stone kitchen and a second story added in the early 1900s, Justice William Smith would not recognize his house.

The compromised architectural integrity cost us the nomination; however, we believed that the history behind the house was so important that it warranted doing whatever was necessary to save it. Because the fire department wanted the space for expansion, things became contentious between the fire board and the preservation committee for the next year and a half. In November 2009 I attended a fire board meeting during which a member said that he had a friend who worked for Frederick County Landmarks Association in Maryland. The friend’s name was Doug Claytor, and he said he could move the house to the Conococheague Institute located near Welsh Run in rural Franklin County, Pennsylvania. “It would get lost there. Why not move the house across the street, where it could remain on Smith’s property?” I suggested. Suddenly all of the tension left the small, crowded room, and fire board members unanimously agreed that this was the best idea. However, some of the committee members in our preservation group

FIGURE 1: Smith house before demolition. Courtesy of Chris Witmer.

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were not completely in favor of moving it; some thought the fire department could use the house for additional space if it was renovated.

Doug appeared at our committee meeting the following week, and I wondered if he had already agreed to work with the fire company to move the house. After getting to know him, I soon realized that he was an expert in colonial architecture with many years of experience in historical restoration and preservation. Doug offered to dismantle the renovations one layer at a time and talked about how much information we could learn about the house and its history by peeling it back to its original form.

The fire department granted us permission to conduct an initial archaeological survey in a small area of the basement, representing a total of 255 square feet, on January 16, 18, and 19, 2010. The survey was conducted by the Cumberland Valley Chapter 27 of the Society for Pennsylvania Archaeology, Inc. In 2010 Doug Stine, president of the chapter, prepared an unpublished report entitled, “Justice William Smith House Basement Excavation,” including a field notes summary by Ron Powell, the chapter’s field supervisor, as well as an analysis of ceramic assemblage provided by archaeologist and ceramicist Scott Parker, Director of Research, Little Antietam Creek, Inc.

They discovered hundreds of artifacts that confirmed that the house dated to the 1750s. Scott Parker, in his “Analysis of Ceramic Assemblage from Smith House Excavations,” which is contained in Doug Stine’s report, writes that the ceramics produced during the Justice William Smith period and excavated from the basement include:

- Chinese export porcelain, prevalent throughout the eighteenth century, and the most expensive and prestigious ceramic type of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries;
- English white salt-glazed stoneware (1715–1790s);
- tin-glazed earthenware (1700–1770s);
- creamware (1760s–1820s);
- English soft-paste porcelain (1740s–1800);
- English slip-glazed coarse earthenware (1700–1770s); and
- the ubiquitous, generic coarse earthenwares produced throughout most of American history and not attributed to any time period.

After analysis of the artifacts, Doug Stine concluded that the dates during which William Smith could have resided on the property were 1759–1775. He writes that “all of these diagnostic type artifacts point to the basement part of the building being there at least from the early 1750s.” He points out that
the slip-glazed earthenware and yellow ware found were traditionally made exclusively for use in serving food in taverns, and that the number of pipe stems and used or lost copper clothing buttons point to the basement being used as an area where people definitely congregated for some reason. He notes that the utilitarian type of ceramics also point to the fact that the basement was used for more than just storage. "A case could be stated for a tavern, residence, trading post or store, or a combination of all of the above"—in colonial America, leading citizens would run a combination tavern and store from their residence. After thorough analysis of the ceramics, Scott Parker writes, "the house and surrounding property are extremely significant, not just to local, but to national history, and all efforts should be made to preserve them."

The Save Smith House Committee unanimously agreed that we needed further archaeological study, and yet we had no real money to pay for it. I discovered AXIS Research, Inc., on line and sent them information about the history and artifacts from the basement. I asked if they would be interested in helping us. Soil scientist Dr. John Wah responded, and in late February 2010 a team of archaeologists—Steve Warfel, Dr. John Wah, Dr. Jonathan Burns, and Dr. Paul Raber—took the Smith House and examined some of the early ceramics from the Doug Stine excavation. We discussed what we hoped to accomplish, and the plan was to return in August for a more thorough excavation. Sometime before then, we would figure out how to obtain a grant and gain permission from the fire department to conduct the survey.

Steve Warfel’s opinion was that we would have no trouble getting the house on the Historic Register because of the artifacts we were pulling out of the ground. Finding three Native American artifacts would have secured placement on the National Register, but to that point, no Indian artifacts had turned up. The artifacts AXIS found included the same types of Chinese export, English, and American ceramics from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that had been unearthed in the basement. An English flint, numerous clay pipe stems measuring about an inch long, a number of tombac buttons, which are made of brass alloy, and a George II half-penny, all dating to the mid-1700s, were excavated from the yard. The archaeologists were able to identify and date various artifacts to determine that the house was built in the mid-1750s.

At this point, we had failed three times to get the house placed on the Historical Register, due to the architectural integrity issue. John Wah listed the Smith House property with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as an archaeology site. This, of course, would not prevent the fire department from razing the house, but could increase its value and maybe persuade them to
change their minds about tearing it down. At this time I met Jackie Nelling. She had owned and lived in the Smith House with her husband, Perry, prior to his illness, which had forced her to sell the house. Five generations of Nellings had lived in the house, and Perry understood, loved, and appreciated its history, which he described in a pamphlet he designed. Jackie shared cases of well-preserved artifacts that her husband had dug up from the yard. She said that she had buckets of hand-forged nails that he had pulled from the beams in the basement. I told Jackie that if we saved the house, I would work on a dedication museum in her husband’s name.

With the fire board’s permission, in April 2010 Richard Pencek, professor of art and architecture at Penn State, came to Mercersburg. Doug Claytor was present when Dick pulled up in front of the Smith House. Dick climbed out of his car, coffee in hand, wearing a big smile, and said, “You’re in trouble.” He was referring to the second-story addition. Dick was impressed with the large, square, original stone exterior and commented that some of the stones probably weighed as much as 800 pounds each. After looking around, he said we could take the house back to its 1765 original, like the houses in Williamsburg, but such an endeavor would be costly, not only to reconstruct the house but also to maintain it as a museum. He went on to explain that in doing so, we would be looking at a reconstruction process rather than a restoration. As to the inside the house, Dick stated, “The events that happened here were as important as the Boston Tea Party.” He said that the large Irish fireplace used for cooking was the most incredible one he had ever seen. Also, on the exterior was the cornerstone with William Smith’s initials, which had been carved with a period stonecutting tool.

In any case, the fire company determined to sell the building and construct a parking lot on the property. As bids were being taken, one Saturday morning I received a phone call from a soft-spoken man who wanted to buy the house. “Is this some sort of prank call?” I asked.

“No, not at all. My name is Orange, Paul Orange, and this isn’t a prank call. I read about your efforts to try to save the house, and I hope it’s not too late but I feel compelled to help. I’d like to purchase the house from the fire company so we can save it.”

Somewhat skeptical, I asked, “What do you do for a living?”

He said that he was a doctor from Fayetteville, Pennsylvania, had a practice in Chambersburg, and he loved history, especially Civil War history. Dr. Orange wanted to see inside the house, and I suggested that it would be best for him to deal directly with the fire department.
Within the next week, I learned that Dr. Orange had offered to purchase the house from them for $100 and pay to move the house with his own money. He would pay to have the lot landscaped and restored to their liking. “Amazing,” I thought. “Just what the fire company wanted all along—for us to move the house. My persistence has paid off.” I thought about Richard and knew he would be happy for us. I hoped he wouldn’t feel too disappointed. The whole thing had been an emotional rollercoaster right from the start.

But for some reason the fire department would not accept the bid, and we spent the next three months, until February 2011, asking why the fire department refused to accept the doctor’s offer. We got nowhere. Things just got messier. We heard that the bid had gone to a demolition company, but they decided to pull out of the deal since it was too controversial. The weekend before the house was to be razed, we staged a peaceful demonstration on February 4–6, 2011. Some people showed up expressing anger toward the fire department for spending $20,000 to demolish the house when the doctor wanted to move it for nothing. People waved and blew their horns in passing cars and pickup trucks to show their support. Even the town mayor joined in our protest.

At the last minute, the house was saved. Tim McCown handed the demolition foreman a piece of paper listing Dr. Orange’s offer to purchase the historic core of the house, including the basement and summer kitchen, for $49,000. During the demolition process, a local stonemason was on site to number the stones. Likewise, a carpenter numbered and labeled all of the boards so the house could be rebuilt. In June 2011 Dr. Orange purchased the property across the street from the original site to serve as the future site for the Smith House. There the stones and boards remain in a heap, testimony to both William Smith and the Black Boys, the contemporaries who had it demolished, and the people who are struggling to reconstruct it.

**FIGURE 2:** Smith house after demolition. Courtesy of Chris Witmer.