

PENNSYLVANIA, HISTORY, PHOTOGRAPHY  
(1959–2005): A PORTFOLIO

*Robert Ginsberg*

*I* had not thought of myself as a Pennsylvania photographer.

William Pencak, editor of *Pennsylvania History*, my colleague for nineteen years and friend for thirty, invited me to contribute a portfolio of my Pennsylvania work to the special issue on photography that Linda A. Ries was planning. A genial and gifted polymath, Pencak had worked together with me on many projects in semiotics, law, literature, and American history. I reviewed my collection of 10,000 slides to see if I might offer a selection.

I discovered that I *was* a Pennsylvania photographer.

Bill did not get to see the results. He died December 9, 2013.

I was a Pennsylvanian from 1963 to 1972, living in the Philadelphia area. From 1972 to 2002, I commuted from my Maryland home outside of Washington, DC, to Pennsylvania to complete my thirty-five years at Penn State. During 500,000 miles as commuter, I repeatedly re-entered Pennsylvania, seeing it in new light.

Brimming with its heritage, Pennsylvania attracts the visitor's camera eye. Follow the guidebook to the attractions! That is your duty as tourist, proclaims the state. Take your obligatory shots. You cannot miss them. History packaged as tourism.

The postcard, the brochure, the magazine, the poster, the video. That is the substance out of which history is made. Before we have seen the sights, we have already seen them.

Crisscrossing the state, as a photographer I had not been taking shots, an aggressive, possessive frame of mind. Instead, I have been taken by moments, experiences that stop me, hold me, and open me to something in the world, something I had missed. Photography not as a calculated art of accurate depiction of a notable object, but as an unanticipated act of subjectivity, a fresh dwelling in the world, a togetherness of subject with subject. Mutual disclosure. My photography deals not with the seen/scene. The unseen deals with me. Photography, though it peers through viewfinders and converts large objects to small prints, is always an enlargement. An enlargement of the heart.

Carrying about a camera, I found myself invited to become accessible to the world. So that I could be found by something that might make me more sensitive, attentive, appreciative, responsive, responsible. Photography as inducement to growth. Introduction to experience. Exploration of the environment. Initiation to the innerment.

The magnificent state capitol at Harrisburg promotes itself across the wide and often wild Susquehanna River (fig. 1). The edge of the developed East, officiously drawing itself up, facing the challenging lands of the West. The site invites the sight. A capital location.

Philadelphia makes its residents and visitors feel at home in a European past. Consider its acropolis in Fairmount Park, crowned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, a majestic Parthenon of French Impressionist treasures. At the bottom of this "Fair Mount," along the Schuylkill River, extend the Greco-Roman structures of the nineteenth-century waterworks (fig. 2).

Philadelphia's grand cultural boulevard, the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, running from the foot of the Art Museum to City Hall in Center City, replicates the Champs-Élysées of Paris. Philadelphia's version, studded with statuary and memorials, has its own Rodin Museum, central Fountain of the Three Rivers (cf. La Place de la Concorde), Free (public) Library and Court House, echoing the eighteenth-century Naval Ministry and the Hôtel de Crillon in Paris, and the recently relocated Barnes Foundation with *its* treasures of French Impressionism.

At Philadelphia's central focal point of Market and Broad Streets stands its distinctive City Hall (fig. 14), a late nineteenth-century imitation of the

Paris City Hall. It is topped with a statue of William Penn, the city's founder, hat on head and hand in a gesture of welcome, peace, blessing, or assertion that this is the place for a peaceable kingdom of brotherly love. The City Hall tower was long the highest edifice in Philadelphia, historic landmark for ships coming in from the ocean. In the 1980s, it was unceremoniously dwarfed by massive skyscrapers. Relegated to history.

The celebrated Academy of Music on Broad Street, now the Avenue of the Arts, is modeled on La Scala of Milan. The Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, the largest Catholic church in Pennsylvania, at Logan Circle on the Franklin Parkway, is modeled on a church in Rome. *Et cetera*.

Replicas repeat the presence of what has disappeared. Thus, the latest copy of the US Brig *Niagara*, warship of the dramatic Battle of Lake Erie, 1813, reflects the past at its dock at Erie (fig. 3), a projection of land that had been wrested from New York in 1785 to make Pennsylvania a Great Lakes state.

The original *Niagara* had been scuttled as means of preserving it. Later raised for reuse. Sunk again as beyond use. Raised again for commemorative use. Partially restored and retained on land. Dismantled as too rotten for restoration. Then reconstructed, containing pieces of the original, and made seaworthy. Don't give up the ship!

The bounty, or the burden, of Pennsylvania's history extends all across its landscape, from its big cities and great waterways to its verdant hillsides. At Valley Forge, nestled in an elbow of the Schuylkill River, where General Washington's ragtag army battled against the raging winter of 1777–78, an impression in the grass is a minimalist ruin. Unnoticed, it marks the outline of rebuilt barracks that subsequently vanished (fig. 4). A relic of a replica. Visible absence. In what is now a National Historical Park, the field lays claims to the history of what we have made for it. The grass reclaims what we have made.

We dwell upon bridges. Even without crossing them to what they connect. When they cross our path, we ponder our connection to them. Philadelphia's big bridges over the Delaware River stitch together the gaps in the American East Coast (fig. 5). Pittsburgh's bridges, where the Ohio River is born, open the way West (fig. 6).

Across a modest rail bridge over the ambling Brandywine River, the silent set of tracks in the countryside of Chadds Ford may still stop us in our tracks for contemplation (fig. 13). We are not going anywhere here. We are already there.

In downtown Chester, where William Penn first landed in his Province of Pennsylvania (Penn's forest), 1682, a bag of garbage floats in the Chester

Creek past the Big C Rollerdrome, a windowless building abutting a major rail line, formerly a fish market, subsequently active as roller rink and temporary home of the Penn State campus in Delaware County (fig. 7).

After the campus moved to its sylvan setting in the serene countryside outside Media, the old building burned down. The fire smoldered for several days thanks to the barrels of wax stored for the rink. Then the creek flooded, leaving no trace of the roller rink or campus in Pennsylvania's oldest city. Penn State Brandywine now thrives on its permanent campus in the idyllic suburbs (fig. 8).

As photographer, the touch of the human presence has stopped me more often than the full-scale monument. That touch may exhibit irony or incongruity, especially in broken signs, worn buildings, neglected surroundings. While signs and inscriptions are meant to convey a message, they live a life of their own that may engender other kinds of message.

After a day's work at the University, I would stop at a Dairy Queen for the reward of a Blizzard. Once, a winter blizzard had knocked down the signpost, but its service to the community was soon restored (fig. 9). Christmas trees, burial wreaths, or blizzards to please.

The Declaration of Independence, so fundamental to the history of Philadelphia, and to the United States, is celebrated throughout the city, including an elegant fountain at the edge of Fairmount Park. "Indipendence" is cut on its stone rim (fig. 10).

Hands-on wooden texture of barn in rural Crawford County (figs. 11, 12). The old structure remains whole, looking out at its farm through many a knothole.

Hands-on scholarly texture on my wife's desk in Wayne (fig. 15). In a scholar's life, always more remains to be done.

While the world appears to the photographer, photographs appear to the viewer. By means of photographic prints, the world makes public to viewers a glimpse of its fingerprints and footprints. We have grown accustomed to view photographs as windows through which we view objects that lie outside. Yet, sometimes, imperceptibly, we step through the open window and find ourselves within the scene. Absorbed in the light, in the color, in the dark, in the silence. Standing in the grass, at the riverbank, in the barn, on the bridge, in the room. We look out at the world from there. No longer apart from the seen, but a part of the scene. Participants.

Photographs offer gentle encouragement to the viewer to open the heart not just to that sight seen, that scene sighted, but to all the rest of the world that the viewer may then see without looking at photographs. Photographs can transform us from being viewers of the world to being presences in the world.

The fifteen previously unpublished prints that follow these words belong to history in the sense that they express my encounter of Pennsylvania spanning forty-six years. Regard them not as documents of what exists, for, in time, all things change and some things no longer exist. You might say that the experience that led to a photograph may have long since ceased to exist. In that case, photographs by their nature are things of the past.

Or you might come to see that the moment experienced has so imprinted itself that it is rescued from passing away and made permanently present. In that case, the prints remain as testimony of one person's engaged subjectivity in life.

What good is that?

If the real subject of these photographs is ourselves as subjects, then the chief value they can have is in the awakening of your participatory subjectivity. Experience shared is life enlarged. Picture that!



FIGURE 1: Harrisburg, across the Susquehanna River, 1988.





FIGURE 2: Old Waterworks, Schuylkill River, Philadelphia, 1965.



FIGURE 3: Reflection, Brig *Niagara*, Erie, 2005.





FIGURE 4: Imprint of Barracks, Valley Forge, ca. 1969.



FIGURE 5: Benjamin Franklin Bridge, Philadelphia, 1996.



FIGURE 6: Bridges, Pittsburgh, 1959.



FIGURE 7: Big C Rollerdrome and Penn State campus, Chester, 1967.



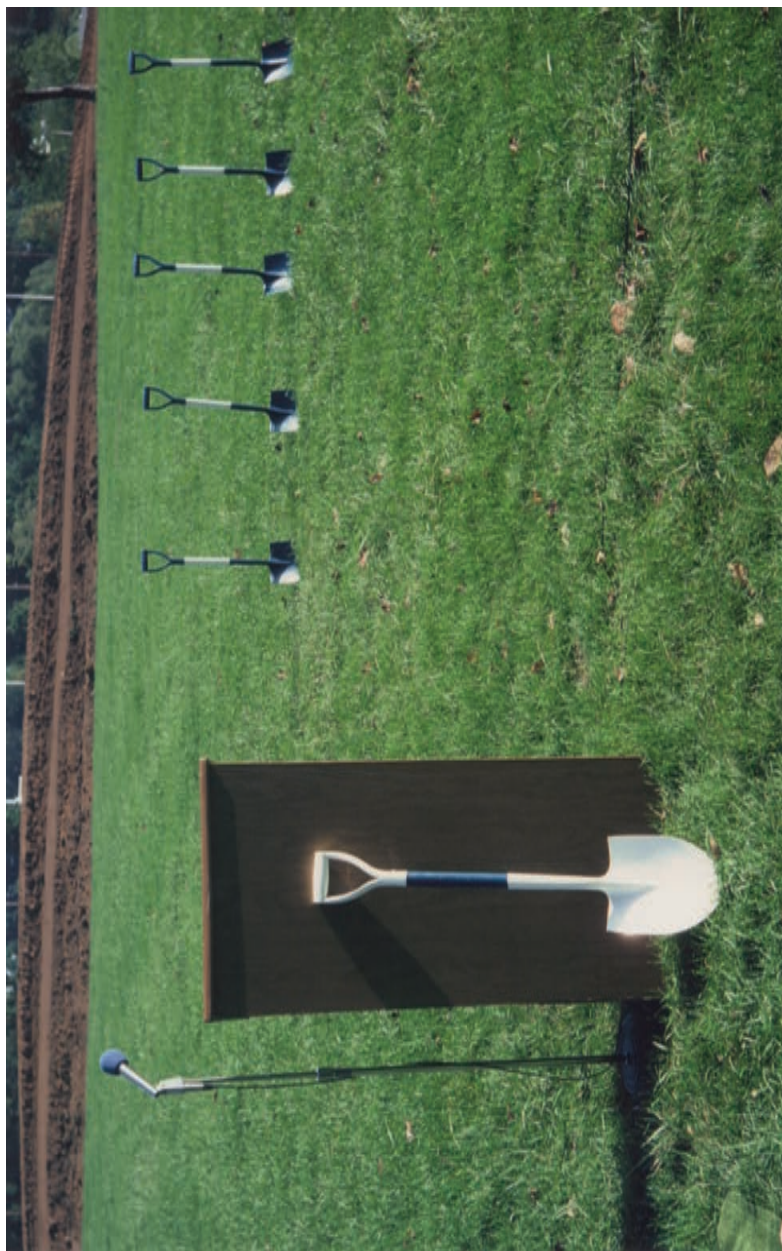


FIGURE 8: Shovels for Groundbreaking, Penn State, Media, 1986.



FIGURE 9: "Grave Mounds Coming," Delaware County, 1989.





FIGURE 10: "Independence" Fountain, Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, 1996.



FIGURE 11: Barn, Crawford County, 2005.

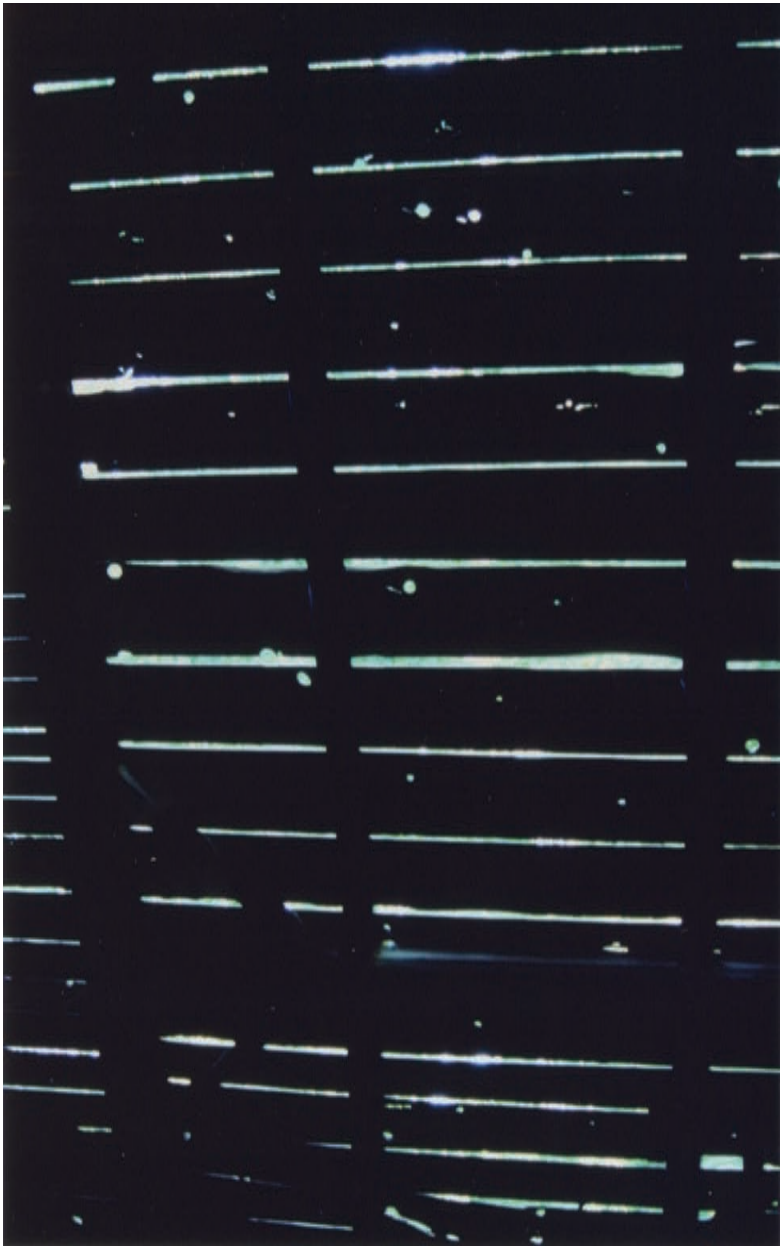


FIGURE 12: Interior, Barn, Crawford County, 2005.





FIGURE 13: Railroad Bridge, Chadds Ford, 1986.



FIGURE 14: City Hall, Night, from above, Philadelphia, 1992.



FIGURE 15: Study of Dr. Ellen S. Ginsberg, Wayne, 1972.