

## A CENTURY OF TEACHING WITH PENNSYLVANIA'S HISTORIC PLACES

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*Abstract:* During the early twentieth century, amid growing interest in the pedagogical significance of heritage landscapes, Pennsylvanians took a leading role in demonstrating the value of teaching with historic places. A forward-looking Pennsylvania Historical Commission (the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission since 1945) and significant investments by the federally sponsored Works Progress Administration paved the way. This essay reflects on that history toward assessing the role of historic places in education today. It suggests that historic places offer important lessons beyond what they reveal about how Americans lived in the past. Most significantly, we gain new insight into Pennsylvania history by interrogating the reasons why historic sites are preserved and how their management changes over time. Several examples illustrate how challenging students with nuanced considerations of historic places encourages all of us to be mindful of persistent threats to Pennsylvania's public historical resources.

*I* am standing in the second-floor front parlor of the old Powel House (circa 1756), a pre-Revolutionary holdover in Philadelphia's exclusive Society Hill neighborhood. With me are a dozen shifting undergraduate students from Temple University where, this semester, I am teaching a course about the history of museums. Our guide is the executive director of the organization

that since 1931 has preserved this and several other historic buildings. The students, many of whom have never visited a house museum, or any museum for that matter, are pleased to discover that George Washington himself once stood in this very building. "But he wouldn't have seen these walls," our guide quips. The students are silent; a few grimace. Much of this room's wood paneling and ornate plasterwork, we discover, replicates original features harvested by collectors during the 1920s. In fact, if you want to see what this room really looked like, you've got to go across town to the Philadelphia Museum of Art where, remarkably, it's been on display in toto since the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> One incredulous student speaks for us all: "No way!"

Such is the magic of teaching with historic places. Within mere minutes, and without reading a single page, my gang of neophytes has just grappled with the complicated fact that the past is not always what it seems, that history, whether written in books or in buildings, is always constructed for us. This, of course, is not Powel House's only lesson, but it is an important one that demonstrates the power of historic places to enrich history pedagogy at all levels. It is a power that teachers of Pennsylvania history have wielded for a long time, at least since the early decades of the last century, and certainly since the dawn of the new social history, when field trips to places with spinning wheels and open hearths became rote for school kids growing up across the commonwealth, including me.

My purpose in this essay is to reflect broadly on the factors that have encouraged Pennsylvanians to make pedagogical use of historic places over time and to consider what lessons that history holds for those of us who still do so today. Our story begins during the early part of the last century amid a confluence of new ideas about history and education, a rising tide of historical preservation, and seismic shifts in the nation's economic landscape. In particular, I look to early issues of the journal *Pennsylvania History* for reports from schoolteachers about how and why they gravitated toward the commonwealth's historic places during the 1930s. From this survey I attempt to discern what it is that we can learn from historic places and how they enrich the classroom. Finally, I offer several examples here of how I use historic places in the college classroom so that others might adapt them to different settings. I hope readers will discover, as I have, that historic places can enhance learning far beyond their usual role in illustrating the past.

It is worth saying, at the outset, a few words about my own reasons for teaching with historic places. Born of the Bicentennial decade's dogged

commercialization of all things colonial, it may be that my generation is somehow predisposed to value—perhaps literally, as some have suggested, in terms of dollars and cents—historic places.<sup>2</sup> I certainly encountered my fair share growing up in south central Pennsylvania. But it wasn't until later, as an undergraduate at Penn State, that I began to appreciate how each historic site tells, as James Loewen puts it, “a tale of two eras”: one associated with the years deemed most significant in the site's history, and one about the period during which preservationists made those decisions.<sup>3</sup> My mentors, including Bill Pencak, to whom this volume is dedicated, encouraged me to explore the years that bind those eras together. I did and have continued to do so in my research and teaching for the last two decades. Why? Because what I learned those many years ago is that historic sites reveal far more about ourselves than they possibly can about our distant pasts. Nobody ever fought to save a house simply because George Washington slept there; we fight to save fragments of the past because we see our lives somehow entwined with them. For this reason, historic sites provide fascinating insights into how Americans' attitudes toward the past have changed over time and, presumably, continue to evolve. They also prompt our students to consider why it is that historic places are worth preserving. In fact, the perilous fiscal climate that has severely limited programming at Pennsylvania's public historical places, and has, indeed, cast a pall upon the nation's heritage landscape, prompts a new kind of teachable moment, one that history teachers cannot afford to ignore.<sup>4</sup>

### A Brief History of Teaching with Pennsylvania's Historic Places

Historians have been teaching with historic places for a long time. History reformer Lucy Maynard Salmon, for instance, argued at the beginning of the twentieth century that understanding the past has as much, if not more, to do with the banal actualities of everyday places as it does with facts and memorization. In her 1912 essay “History in a Backyard,” for instance, Salmon dismissed “the treasures of Europe” as wanting “in comparison with the wealth of the whole world that is ours . . . when claimed from the back steps.”<sup>5</sup> A similar notion animated Doylestown's Henry Mercer, who, also at the turn of the century, erected his idiosyncratic museum and tile works as monuments to the didactic qualities of bygone objects and places associated with the nation's preindustrial landscape. Salmon and Mercer typified a burgeoning interest during those years in the promise of Progressive educational

reform, which, among other goals, sought to bolster American democracy by inculcating in students an appreciation for the pragmatic concerns of daily life.<sup>6</sup>

In time, the Progressive impulse to learn from historic places found an unwitting accomplice in the conservative impulse to preserve historic places. In Pennsylvania, as was the case throughout much of the nation after the Civil War, old white families chafed at what seemed like dire threats to their longstanding patrimony: immigrants flocking from eastern Europe and Asia, African American freedmen seeking opportunity in the North, industrial landscapes run amuck, labor violence in every quarter, and mystifying technological transformations emerging daily. And because what fortunes they once claimed had largely succumbed to the new economy, old guard Pennsylvanians looked elsewhere to assert their ownership of the past. As Roy F. Nichols put it, between 1876 and 1889 “there grew up a series of hereditary patriotic societies” whose eagerness to save bits of the past owed to the “very practical need of finding genealogical data to support their claims of descent from colonial and revolutionary ancestry.”<sup>7</sup> The claims of this self-styled elite extended to historic sites such as Fort Pitt in Pittsburgh, where in 1930 the Daughters of the American Revolution erected a marker celebrating “Anglo-Saxon supremacy in the United States.”<sup>8</sup>

Chauvinisms notwithstanding, lobbying by Pennsylvanians from across the spectrum of historical mindedness—genealogists, educators, nascent preservationists, and all manner of amateur and professional historians—succeeded in establishing the Pennsylvania Historical Commission (PHC) in 1913 to, among other tasks, identify and protect the commonwealth’s “historic public buildings, military works [and] monuments.”<sup>9</sup> Chronic underfunding and organizational flux, however, slowed the commission’s work during its early years. Appeals to private donors bound it almost exclusively to commemorative work, such as the hanging of bronze placards on boulders abutting land associated with William Penn. To make matters worse, commission appointees shifted with each gubernatorial election. Nonetheless, a few managed to stay on, including Frances Dorrance who, over thirty years, slowly encouraged the PHC away from its early filiopietism. In fact, Dorrance’s 1929 tombstone inscription survey, for which she enlisted schoolchildren across Pennsylvania, likely ranks among the commonwealth’s earliest teaching-with-historic-places initiatives.<sup>10</sup>

It was amid the instability of its first decades, too, that the PHC acquired its first historical properties, including Ambridge’s Old Economy Village

(1919), Sunbury's Fort Augusta (1920), the Conrad Weiser Homestead (1920) near Womelsdorf, and Drake's Well (1931) in Titusville. This is not to say that the commission was prepared to manage a stable of historic properties. Rather, in most cases the PHC simply propped up the work of local historical societies seeking logistical support wherever they could find it. Indeed, the PHC's hand only strengthened as it responded to calls such as from the Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies (PFHS) to encourage the teaching of Pennsylvania history in schools and universities.<sup>11</sup> How to do that, however, was not entirely clear, especially as Pennsylvania confronted the reality of a national economy in rapid decline during the early 1930s.

It was the Great Depression, in fact—or, rather, three consequences of it—that laid the groundwork in Pennsylvania for what evolved into a remarkable statewide apparatus for teaching history with historic places. First, voters responded to the economic collapse by electing a Democratic governor in 1935 who, of course, appointed a new slate of history commissioners. Among them was Frank W. Melvin, president of the PFHS. Melvin's aggressive lobbying of the state legislature generated more support for history programming in the commonwealth than ever before. Second, thanks to Melvin's advocacy, the commission managed to hire a state historian, Penn State's S. K. Stevens. Stevens, as Brent Glass notes, brought a "growing interest in the educational value of historic sites and museums."<sup>12</sup> It was an interest he championed in Pennsylvania throughout his thirty-five-year career. Third, and finally, the PHC received considerable support from President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal by way of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers Project and its Museum Extension Project (MEP).

The WPA's activities, especially, forged a link in Pennsylvania between teaching and historic places. Most visibly, it assisted with curatorial and preservation projects, such as the full-scale recreation of William Penn's Pennsbury Manor in 1939, which committed the PHC to telling "Pennsylvania's history . . . through buildings, furnishings and landscapes."<sup>13</sup> But in other ways, too, the WPA connected classrooms with historic places. The MEP, for instance, managed by the WPA's Division of Women's and Professional Projects, churned out all manner of classroom teaching aids related to state history. By filling out a simple order form, teachers could purchase any of the MEP's almost thirty handmade, detailed scale models of historic Pennsylvania buildings, including the Betsy Ross House, Washington's Valley Forge headquarters, Daniel Boone's birthplace, and the Ephrata Cloister.<sup>14</sup> Josephine Kerns, supervisor of a fifth-grade laboratory school

at East Stroudsburg State Teachers College (now East Stroudsburg University), reported that “from models of Historic Buildings in Pennsylvania made by the WPA,” students “learned to recognize those most important.”<sup>15</sup> At a time when history education still revolved around antiquity, the commonwealth’s historic places, including some in Kerns’s students’ very own backyards, had begun to find their way into the classroom.

The intersection of progressive educational reform, historic preservation, and the New Deal’s various programs also compelled schoolteachers like Kerns to venture beyond the classroom during the 1930s. The trend is evident in the pages of *Pennsylvania History*, a scholarly journal that during those years devoted a portion of each issue to the concerns of public school teachers. Monroe County assistant county superintendent Nathan G. Meyer recommended in 1938, for instance, “that history classes visit the Pennsylvania State Museum at Harrisburg,” especially since classroom materials concerning Pennsylvania history were so scarce.<sup>16</sup> Earl W. Dickey, an Altoona Senior High School history teacher, reported that students in his Pennsylvania history course visited “the Blair County Historical Museum, early homes of the county, old mills, industrial plants, historical markers, [and] the Old Portage Railroad.” Dickey argued, in terms that sound starkly familiar today, that field trips to historic places empowered his students to understand “such problems as confront our state in reforestation, soil conservation, slum clearance, flood control, [and] the migration of industries to other states.”<sup>17</sup>

Accounts of high school history clubs also shed light on how historic sites figured in commonwealth classrooms during the years just prior to World War II. The PHC’s involvement in Old Economy Village prompted students of Ambridge High School to form the Ambridge Local History Society in 1933. Avis Mary Custis Cauley recalled, “when we had climbed the tree said to be the descendant of one located on the site of the old octagonal powder house erected by Anthony Wayne[,] walked around and over a trench dug by soldiers of the ‘legion’ of 1792–93, and searched the plain for other evidences of legion occupation, we were all fascinated by the possibilities unfolding before us.”<sup>18</sup> Ella Marie Schmuck, student president of East Huntingdon Township High School History Club, recounted a stunning array of activities sponsored by her organization in coordination with the school’s local history class. Schmuck and her peers sought out archeological remnants of the Braddock expedition at Dunbar’s Camp, worked with a local history professor to clear portions of Braddock’s Trail, and searched for and evidently discovered a local hunting cabin where George Washington supposedly

visited. This is to say nothing of annual daylong tours of regional historic sites—one trip included Joseph Coulon de Villiers, Sieur de Jumonville's grave, Fort Necessity, Washington's gristmill, and Christopher Gist's plantation—capped each year by a visit to the Overton Historical Museum to admire Henry Frick's birthplace.<sup>19</sup>

These examples demonstrate that the PHC and its supporters had by the middle of the twentieth century made a significant educational investment in historic places shaped by national trends and sustained by enthusiastic local demand. It was their success that prompted legislation in 1945 that reconfigured the PHC, along with the commonwealth's Archives Division and the State Museum, into the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC), which to this day exists to "preserve the Commonwealth's natural and cultural heritage as a steward, teacher and advocate for the people of Pennsylvania and the nation."<sup>20</sup> Under S. K. Stevens's leadership, the PHMC's capacity to augment teaching with historic places expanded considerably throughout the postwar years, particularly with the acquisition of new historic properties—totaling forty as of 2014—and the development of modern interpretive strategies. And, insomuch as the PHMC sought to implement during Stevens's tenure what it learned about the educational potential of historic places during the New Deal, the commonwealth's expanding system of historic sites provided a living classroom in which students could witness examples of how Pennsylvanians lived in the past and, as Schmuck's account suggests, could infer lessons for the future.

These lessons, however, were never quite as pure as Schmuck, Dickey, and many of their successors have suggested. Celebratory visits to Henry Frick's birthplace, for instance, recall an era when learning about the commonwealth's past meant studying the accomplishments of its financiers, industrialists, and entrepreneurs, and not the anonymous throngs who made those accomplishments possible. After World War II as well, what students learned at Pennsylvania's historic sites was largely informed by the ideological underpinnings of the nation's postwar heritage landscape. The spinning wheels and costumed reenactors I recall from school field trips, for instance, typified a mingling over time at historic sites of Cold War-era consensus history with the bottom-up sensibilities of new social historians. Kids like me learned time after again how hardscrabble Pennsylvanians had prevailed together against all odds to build a better future. The ring of the blacksmith's hammer and the ever-present aroma of smoldering coals seemed to prove it.

And yet, even for children of my generation, the message just didn't square with what our parents were saying about the problems at Three Mile Island or the layoffs at Bethlehem Steel. Even by the 1990s, well after history scholarship had complicated old ideas about power and prosperity, particularly with regard to matters of race, class, and gender, historic site interpretation tended to toe the old celebratory line. A 1987 guide to the commonwealth's historic places published by the PHMC—and still in circulation, incidentally, eight years later when I bought it for John Frantz's undergraduate survey of Pennsylvania history—recalls a network of historic places still wed to the notion that the story of Pennsylvania's past is primarily a story about scientific, industrial, and military accomplishment.<sup>21</sup>

Nationally, however, conversations concerning the pedagogical potential of historic places had taken an important turn. Contractions in academic hiring, alongside Bicentennial fever and an expansion of the National Park Service's history corps, sent more and more university-trained social historians to work at American historic sites by the late 1970s. The consequent, and largely unprecedented, mingling of young progressive historians with old heritage landscapes spawned new methods for doing history at historic places and even a professional association, the National Council on Public History, to advance the cause.<sup>22</sup> Evidence of the shift appeared in Pennsylvania. In 1982, for instance, the University of Pennsylvania's Philadelphia Social History Project devised its Historymobile program "to provide a portable bank of skills . . . through which people could help discover and build that history for themselves."<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, as at the flood museum in Johnstown, big-dollar interpretive revisions during the 1980s attracted national attention to how historic sites could confront the complexities of Pennsylvania's industrial past, and its class anxieties, without alienating visitors.<sup>24</sup>

Delivering these lessons to classrooms was another challenge entirely. The National Park Service (NPS) and the National Trust for Historic Preservation discovered, amid the push toward outcomes-based education in American schools during the late twentieth century, that teachers lacked the time and resources to take advantage of properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Beginning in 1991, therefore, the two organizations partnered to create the Teaching with Historic Places program to develop lesson plans, primarily for middle-school teachers, that bring historic sites within easier reach while providing important lessons about doing and understanding history, especially in local communities, while also doing the hard work of adapting these lessons to changing state teaching goals and standards.

Evocative of the WPA's Museum Extension Project, the program's success is evident in the awards it has received and the projects it has inspired, including Pennsylvania's own ExplorePaHistory.com.<sup>25</sup> It is this initiative, in fact, that has made the phrase "teaching with historic places" a touchstone in history education.

In many regards, the NPS and the National Trust have set the standard for teaching with historic places across the curriculum in Pennsylvania and beyond. Their work preserves the WPA's concern with community history but augments it with a more nuanced engagement with problematic pasts typical of the new social history. What's more, when expanded with service-learning projects and advanced readings, the model is applicable to college classrooms as well. It's precisely this blend of history education with community engagement and historic site interpretation that has become a bulwark of public history curricula for graduate students and, increasingly, undergraduates.<sup>26</sup> In Pennsylvania today, several models can be found, including the one here at Temple, where teaching with historic places is a staple of our public history curriculum. Elsewhere, as at Slippery Rock University, the operation of a historic site has been integrated into public history courses. Most impressive are hands-on projects such as those at Shippensburg University, where students recently grappled with the history of racial discrimination through the lens of a grassroots cemetery restoration project.<sup>27</sup>

### **In the Classroom: Historic Sites as Evidence**

Although this brief survey cannot possibly account for the myriad ways that education happens in conjunction with the commonwealth's historic places, it does shed some light on how these sites have functioned over time as educational tools. And it certainly demonstrates that their value in that capacity is determined in significant ways by the quality and quantity of local, state, and federal resources allocated for their support. But it also prompts us to ask a question of historic places that Dwight T. Pitcaithley poised nearly three decades ago: "what can be learned from them?" Field trips and museum visits are useful regardless of what information they provide about the past because they encourage students to think broadly about how and where learning can happen. But what is history's added value? I agree with Pitcaithley, who concludes that we stand to learn as much from how historic sites are "made" as we do from the history they purport to represent.<sup>28</sup> In fact, with

an eye toward teaching students how to think historically, we might better ask: what is it, exactly, that historic sites are evidence of?

The most obvious answer is that historic sites are evidence of how our ancestors lived in the past. They *show* us what happened. This was precisely the notion that inspired educators during the 1930s to embrace Pennsylvania's historic places. Historic buildings and landscapes, as one of Independence Hall's midcentury champions put it, "speak quite as eloquently as do the journals, contemporary newspapers, diaries, and correspondence preserved in manuscript or early imprints in our libraries."<sup>29</sup> They are, in other words, primary sources akin to any the historian might call upon. And with the trend toward introducing students at earlier and earlier ages to primary sources, historic sites are one of the easiest and most experiential ways to "show" students historical evidence. What's more, preservation is itself generative of historical data. During the early days of historical archeology, for instance, researchers at Fort Pitt and Fort Duquesne demonstrated how digging through the dirt could answer important questions about eighteenth-century military strategy.<sup>30</sup> The physical immediacy of historic places thus conspires alongside their evidentiary value to conjure a sense of authenticity that animates the past; it makes us feel like we're *really there*. It's exactly this conceit that has sustained costumed interpretation and other vestiges of high-order living history, especially battle reenactment, in educational programming at PHMC properties for decades.

But, as my students discover within minutes of entering Powel House, historic sites are not "real," inasmuch as we do not actually step into another time when we visit them. Rather, every historic site is the culmination of choices made over time about which facets of the past to preserve and which to ignore. These choices always reflect the particularities of the historical moment in which they are made, and so, by examining them, we discover that historic sites are also evidence of how our memory of the past has changed over time.<sup>31</sup> The wealthy Philadelphians who preserved Powel House during the 1920s, for instance, did not choose, as we might today, to preserve those facets of the home, such as its kitchen or servants' garret, that would help us understand the lives of working people across categories of difference such as race and gender. They preferred, rather, to remember a discrete historical moment seemingly unsullied by the kind of social conflict that was by the 1930s evident everywhere in Philadelphia's urban milieu. Powel House, then, though evidence of life in colonial Philadelphia, also unwittingly documents the worldview of twentieth-century preservationists during Philadelphia's interwar years.

Sifting through these layers of accumulated interpretive meaning is a real challenge, especially for the underpaid skeleton crews charged with maintaining our nation's historic places. In fact, the extent to which historic site managers struggle to balance quality interpretation with facilities management and fundraising is itself evidence of the increasing difficulty inherent in sustaining public cultural resources in the United States. This third strain of evidence—what historic sites reveal about their own day-to-day management—provides crucial lessons not only for students considering careers in public history but for anyone concerned about the role of government in public life. Government funding for arts and cultural programming, including history-related activities, has been on the decline for decades. And, although there appears to be some improvement at state and local levels, overall public funding for organizations such as museums and historic sites has declined by over 30 percent during the last two decades. In Philadelphia, arts and cultural organizations receive less than 20 percent of their contributed income from public sources. For the rest, site managers rely on private gifts, corporate donations, and hard-earned grants from charitable foundations.<sup>32</sup>

The problem with this situation, beyond its obvious threats to the material welfare of our nation's historic resources, is that the history that gets done at historic places looks more and more like it did a century ago, during the early years of the PHC. As Carolyn Kitch concludes in her recent survey of the commonwealth's industrial heritage landscape: "the future of [public history] is increasingly up to private funders." We have seen how the PHC's early reliance upon wealthy donors obligated it to celebratory commemoration. If Kitch's study is any indication, we may be in for more of the same. She demonstrates how increased demand placed upon commonwealth historic places to lure private monies has incentivized noncontroversial interpretation wherein Pennsylvania history is reduced once again to vague platitudes about heroic ancestors and industrial prowess.<sup>33</sup> Even more troubling, Kitch reveals how Pennsylvania's increasingly privatized heritage economy seems to have pitted a new generation of corporate factory tours and Civil War reenactments against the old "new" social history, which, for a time at least, flourished amid the PHMC's late-twentieth-century salad days. Without public support for responsible history making at commonwealth historic sites, what will Pennsylvania's next generation learn about its past? What lessons about economic, environmental, and labor history, for instance, would young people gather from sites funded by US Steel, Sunoco, and Aramark?

The question, then, is how history teachers might wrangle with these problems by incorporating the three evidentiary aspects of historic sites into classroom learning experiences. Although I've had success doing it in a variety of history classes, here I offer examples taken from *Museums and American Culture*, the undergraduate course that has elicited the most positive response from my students. I sense that students enjoy this class because it surprises them. Many who sign up do so to fill course requirements outside their majors. Some expect it to be easy, particularly given its reliance on field trips—as many as ten in some semesters. Everyone discovers early on, however, that the course is neither easy nor only about museums. Rather, *Museums and American Culture* uses museums and historic places as a lens through which to examine how what we learn about the past is often shaped for us by forces unseen. Understanding why and how that happens, I contend, empowers us to exert greater agency in a world where cultural power can be had in unexpected ways. Because my expertise lies in the history of history museums and historic sites, they become our focus. And because I agree with Salmon that every place is a historic place, we begin in our own backyard to understand how the commonwealth's past can be read in the history of its cultural institutions.

Each iteration of *Museums and American Culture* is built around a semester-long research project for which students must choose a local historic site or museum early on and “live” with it throughout the semester. By the end, if all goes well, each student will have spent considerable time at a museum or historic site not included on our field trip circuit, considered the broad sweep of its institutional history, met with at least one member of its staff, reckoned its success against standards established in class discussions, and given hard thought to what its future might hold. Although the project's themes shift from semester to semester, often to accommodate opportunities for collaboration with particular historic sites or organizations, in each case it calls upon students to identify the three strains of evidence outlined above. They must consider their site for what it tells us about the distant past; what it reveals about contests of memory over time; and what it portends for the future of cultural nonprofits in Philadelphia and beyond.

In its simplest form, this assignment yields mini-institutional histories reminiscent of those produced by organizations such as the National Park Service in conjunction with cultural resource management studies. In this model, I assign four writing assignments over the course of the semester. The first, due early on, simply requests that students identify a local history

museum or historic site that they would enjoy learning more about. Several weeks later, everyone must submit a site profile summarizing the particularities of each site's institutional history, including founding dates, founder profiles, funding histories, visitation trends, and shifts over time in administrative structure. Completing this assignment, of course, requires that the students spend time at their sites and, in most cases, make contact with staff members. A third assignment, due in the third quarter of the semester, requires that students identify their sites' stakeholders with particular attention to who has been included and excluded from shaping mission directives over time. Finally, everyone submits a long research paper, which builds upon the preceding assignments, explaining the historical origins of each site and its institutional and intellectual evolution over time and suggesting ways that each site might better serve its various stakeholders in the future while remaining solvent amid a dire funding landscape.

The ability of students to succeed with this assignment typically hinges on their willingness to engage a wide variety of course readings that I draw from history, museum studies, anthropology, and cultural studies. Keeping them motivated, however, is my job, and I've found it is vitally important to lead by example—in this case, by peppering class conversations with examples from my own research. Familiarizing everyone with the language of cultural nonprofits early on is also important. I build entire class meetings, for instance, around the meaning of “stakeholder” and “public trust,” particularly as they relate to the preservation of public historical resources. It's important, too, that we work together. On days when students submit assignments, we exchange our work with one another and consider how various historic places, and our responses to them, compare. By the end of the semester, the results can be really fantastic. I recall, for instance, a student who argued convincingly, using archived documents and site reports, that the institutional particularities of the Pennypacker Mills historic site in Schwenksville had, over time, led it to obscure Governor Pennypacker's nativist impulses and his indifference toward suffrage, in part to avoid grappling with the Colonial Revival's ideological underpinnings. Confronting the reasons why the obfuscation occurred, this student reasoned, might be the perfect way for site managers to entice new audiences and, of course, new donors.

Although casting this assignment as institutional history can yield great returns, it also risks alienating students whose interests are not necessarily aligned with museum history. One solution, especially for classes consisting

primarily of non-majors, is to reshape it around a group project tied to a particular theme. One semester, for instance, I taught a version of this course retooled for students majoring in fields related to business, marketing, and hospitality. Rather than select just any historic place, however, I requested that everyone select a site that had been included in the WPA's 1937 visitors guide to Philadelphia.<sup>34</sup> Our challenge would be to study those sites and then collectively rewrite the guide for modern audiences. The result, though admittedly mixed, lives on digitally even today. More importantly, although the assignments leading to the final project remained largely unchanged, as did the broad arc of our classroom conversations, the thematic focus allowed us to think about the development of historic site management since the 1930s through the lens of tourism, which appealed mightily to this particular cohort of students. Better yet, examining the WPA's impact on historic places in Pennsylvania during a semester, as it happened, when Pennsylvania's General Assembly announced radical reductions in funding for public schools and universities prompted hard but productive conversations about the necessity of public funding for sustaining Pennsylvania's cultural health. More than a few students, many who had never taken a history class before, left the course impassioned advocates for Pennsylvania's historic places and the power of teaching with them.

Making students into history advocates is, perhaps, the greatest outcome of teaching with historic places. It enriches their lives and can make useful contributions to those of our colleagues who manage historic sites. In this vein, I offer one final example drawn from *Museums and American Culture* wherein I partnered with a colleague, Temple's Kenneth Finkel, and Historic Germantown, a nonprofit coalition of sixteen museums and historic sites scattered throughout a portion of Philadelphia distanced from the city's usual tourist haunts by deep postwar economic and social dislocations. Our task was to consider how these sites, which have traditionally dwelled on the lives of wealthy, white Americans, might build stronger constituencies among Philadelphia's usual coterie of heritage tourists and within Germantown's predominantly working-class African American communities. I divided students into small groups and assigned each to work with a partner site throughout the semester. The highlight of the course was a "dashboard tour" of Germantown, engineered by Finkel, during which students had just seconds to answer a series of questions about each historic site we drove by during a two-hour bus tour.

The dashboard tour, designed to assess what factors encourage young people to visit historic sites, generated particularly fascinating insights, which we gathered and distilled using Twitter. We learned, for instance, that our students were most likely to visit historic places in neighborhoods that reminded them of home and that they'd pay far more for the opportunity than most sites charge. This kind of data can be useful for historic places, where identifying new audiences and planning for fiscal uncertainty has become a matter of survival. Gathering it, as I've suggested here, gives students a sense of investment in our community's historic places that they wouldn't typically garner from watching costumed reenactors spin wool and reminisce about the olden days.

Museums and American Culture represents my effort to teach with historic sites in ways that showcase, but also challenge, their value as historical evidence. I'm not always so ambitious. Although I incorporate historic sites into all of my courses, including those concerned with themes and issues more traditionally associated with Pennsylvania history, I often rely primarily on their ability to illustrate the past. I have, for instance, taken students to the Independence National Historical Park to search for material expressions of republicanism in Philadelphia's colonial architecture. We've also sought to understand the city's antebellum transformations at sites such as Eastern State Penitentiary and the Wagner Free Institute of Science. And yet, my students are never so satisfied, nor so inspired, as when we contend with the messiness of historical representation that is particularly evident at those of Philadelphia's historic sites that celebrate its Revolutionary past. These are young people, after all, who have lived the majority of their lives amid the aggressive patriotism of the post-9/11 years. For them, it is often a first opportunity to question claims about American exceptionalism without fear of reprisal. That it can happen at historic sites is a revelation.

By merit of studying these places in Philadelphia, however, a town that is itself a museum of museums, we do manage to confront an awful lot of Pennsylvania history. Even if we were to focus on historic places typically concerned with Revolutionary history—say, the Betsy Ross House, Valley Forge, and Independence Hall—the multiplying effect of Loewen's "tale of two eras" would also obligate us to understand Pennsylvania's social and political landscape during the times when Americans worked most vigorously to enshrine these places: the 1870s, the 1890s, and the 1940s.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, then, teaching with historic sites creates ample opportunities to explore facets of the commonwealth's past that often escape notice in typical Pennsylvania

history courses. Moreover, and especially for those of my students who grew up nearby, it combats the boorish notion that all Pennsylvania history is either Revolutionary or Civil War history. And it certainly still makes clear, as did Lucy Maynard Salmon and the Museum Extension Project, that there is nothing provincial about local history. Rather, teaching with historic sites encourages us away from the rigid chronologies that often alienate students whose interests are much broader. Unlike historians who, as David Glassberg observes, typically begin with a topic and then look “for the places where it happened,” the audience we’re charged with inspiring “begins with a place that it cares about and then asks, ‘What happened here?’”<sup>36</sup>

But perhaps the most important outcome of teaching with historic places in nuanced ways is that we, the teachers, discover precisely how difficult it is for our colleagues who manage historic sites to do their work well. It is true that nonprofit cultural organizations charged with the stewardship of historic places are bound by law and mission prerogatives to serve their publics. But the burden of serving an uninformed public amid this era’s attack on public funding is too great for even the most established of our nation’s historic places. If the commonwealth’s historic places are to nourish our classrooms for generations to come, as they have since the early twentieth century, then we must return the favor by making advocates of our students, by joining the fight to expand public funding for the arts and humanities, and by devising partnerships that remind everyone just how fortunate we are to be inheritors of Pennsylvania’s rich and complex past.

## NOTES

I am grateful to Larry Cebula, Tamara Gaskell, Mary Rizzo, and Jennifer Zwilling for connecting me with a host of useful sources. The journals’ anonymous readers helped me along, too. Hilary Iris Lowe is, as always, my first reader.

1. The Powel House is one of four house museums managed by the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks. For more on its parlor, see Alexandra Alevizatos Kirtley, “Front Parlor from the Powel House, Philadelphia, 1769–70,” in “Period Room Architecture in American Art Museums,” ed. David L. Barquist, special issue *Winterthur Portfolio* 46 (2012): E12–E23.
2. Consider, for instance, Tammy Gordon’s argument that the 1976 Bicentennial celebration’s dual emphasis on patriotism and private enterprise encouraged Americans to view the past through the lens of individual profit. See *The Spirit of 1976: Commerce, Community, and the Politics of Commemoration* (Amherst, MA, 2013).

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3. James W. Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York, 2013), 21–22.
4. As of 2012, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission received less than one-tenth of a percent of the state budget. In the most recent state budget, despite a recommended 3.8 percent increase in general government support for the PHMC, the agency received a \$507,000 cut. The commonwealth did, however, make \$2 million available in grants to eligible museums during 2013–14. See <https://www.philaculture.org/groundswell/pennsylvania-state-budget-update>.
5. Lucy Maynard Salmon, “History in a Back Yard,” in *History and the Texture of Modern Life: Selected Essays*, ed. Nicholas Adams and Bonnie G. Smith (Philadelphia, 2001), 83. For more on Salmon, see <http://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/faculty/prominent-faculty/lucy-maynard-salmon.html>.
6. On Mercer, see Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876–1926* (Chicago, 1998), 151–91.
7. Roy F. Nichols, *The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission: A History* (Harrisburg, PA, 1967), 5. For the classic treatment on the nation’s turn-of-the-century “modernity crisis,” see T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago, 1981).
8. Quoted in Brent D. Glass, “Expanding a Vision: Seventy-Five Years of Public History,” *Pennsylvania Heritage* 15, no. 1 (1989): 26. This essay is reprinted in *The Commonwealth’s Memory: A Symposium on the Occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the PHMC* (Harrisburg, PA, 1991), 1–8.
9. Nichols, *Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission*, 8.
10. *Ibid.*, 12–13. For a discussion of Dorrance as a pioneering public historian, see Glass, “Expanding a Vision,” 26, 28.
11. Nichols, *Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission*, 15.
12. Glass, “Expanding a Vision,” 28.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Curtis Miner, “‘Art with a Purpose’: Pennsylvania’s Museum Extension Project, 1935–1943,” *Pennsylvania Heritage* 34, no. 2 (2008): 14–23; Pennsylvania Works Progress Administration, “State-Wide Museum Extension Project Catalog Number Three,” Digital Archives of Broward County, Bienes Museum of the Modern Book, Pennsylvania Pamphlets and Handbooks Collection, <http://digitlab.browardlibrary.org/u/?wpa,76>.
15. Josephine B. Kerns, “Pennsylvania Bountiful: A Unit of Work in the Fifth Grade,” *Pennsylvania History* 7 (1940): 188.
16. Nathan G. Meyer, “Improving the Teaching of Pennsylvania History,” *Pennsylvania History* 5 (1938): 200–201.
17. Earl W. Dickey, “The Teaching of Pennsylvania History,” *Pennsylvania History* 5 (1938): 125, 128.
18. Avis Mary Custis Cauley, “The High-School History Club as a Builder of Morale and Citizenship,” *Pennsylvania History* 9 (1942): 212.
19. Ella Marie Schmuck, “Pennsylvania History in East Huntingdon High School,” *Pennsylvania History* 6 (1939): 119–23.
20. “About the PHMC,” Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, [http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/about\\_the\\_phmc/1579](http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/about_the_phmc/1579).

21. The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, *Pennsylvania's Landmarks from the Delaware to the Ohio* (Lebanon, PA, 1987).
22. Seth C. Bruggeman, "Public History," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*, ed. Joan Shelley Rubin and Scott E. Casper (New York, 2013).
23. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, NY, 1990), 230.
24. On reactions to Johnstown, see for instance, Ellen M. Rosenthal, review of *The Johnstown Flood*, permanent exhibition, Johnstown Flood Museum, opened May 31, 1989, in *Journal of American History* 80 (1993): 210–15. For insight into how industrial history was being reconceived at historic sites during this time, including in Pennsylvania, see Thomas E. Leary, "Shadows in the Cave: Industrial Ecology and Museum Practice," *Public Historian* 11, no. 4 (1989): 39–60.
25. An overview of the program appears in Beth M. Boland and Fay Metcalf, "Teaching with Historic Places," *OAH Magazine of History* 7, no. 3 (1993): 62–68.
26. See, for instance, Deborah Welch, "Teaching Public History: Strategies for Undergraduate Program Development," *Public Historian* 25, no. 1 (2003): 71–82; and Elizabeth Belanger, "Public History and Liberal Learning: Making the Case for the Undergraduate Practicum Experience," *Public Historian* 34, no. 4 (2012): 30–51.
27. To learn about Slippery Rock's Old Stone House, see <http://oldstonehousepa.org/about/>. Steven B. Burg summarizes the Shippensburg project in "'From Troubled Ground to Common Ground': The Locust Grove African-American Cemetery Restoration Project: A Case Study of Service-Learning and Community History," *Public Historian* 30, no. 2 (2008): 51–82.
28. Dwight T. Pitcaithley, "Historic Sites: What Can Be Learned from Them?" *History Teacher* 20 (1987): 207–19.
29. William E. Lingelbach, "Philadelphia and the Conservation of the National Heritage," *Pennsylvania History* 20 (1953): 341.
30. Wesley L. Bliss, "The Interdependence of Archaeology and History Illustrated by Excavations at Fort Pitt and Fort Duquesne," *Pennsylvania History* 12 (1945): 73.
31. Memory studies have produced an outpouring of scholarship in recent decades. Examples that will interest Pennsylvania readers include Carolyn Kitch, *Pennsylvania in Public Memory: Reclaiming the Industrial Past* (University Park, PA, 2012); Simon J. Bronner, *Popularizing Pennsylvania: Henry W. Shoemaker and the Progressive Uses of Folklore and History* (University Park, PA, 1996); Charlene Mires, *Independence Hall in American Memory* (Philadelphia, 2002); Lorette Treese, *Valley Forge: Making and Remaking a National Symbol* (University Park, PA, 1995); and Jim Weeks, *Gettysburg: Memory, Market, and an American Shrine* (Princeton, NJ, 2009).
32. On the causes of long-term reductions in public funding, see David Glassberg, "What's 'American' about American Lieux de Mémoire?" in *The Merits of Memory: Concepts, Contexts, Debates*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Grabbe and Sabine Schindler, American Studies: A Monograph Series, vol. 143 (Heidelberg, Ger., 2008), 68–70. For national funding levels, corrected for inflation, see Ryan Stubbs, "Public Funding for the Arts: 2013 Update," *GIA Reader* 24, no. 3 (2013), <http://www.giarts.org/article/public-funding-arts-2013-update>. Arts and culture data for Philadelphia appears in Pew

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33. Kitch, *Pennsylvania in Public Memory*, 173–76.
  34. Federal Writers' Project, *Philadelphia: A Guide to the Nation's Birthplace* (Philadelphia, 1937). See online at <https://archive.org/details/philadelphiaguidooofederich>.
  35. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "How Betsy Ross Became Famous: Oral Tradition, Nationalism, and the Invention of History," *Common-Place* 8, no. 1 (2007), <http://www.common-place.org/vol-08/no-01/ulrich/>; Treese, *Valley Forge*; and Mires, *Independence Hall in American Memory*.
  36. David Glassberg, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst, MA, 2001), 111.