

INTRODUCTION: DEFINING THE MID-ATLANTIC REGION

*I*n 1997 *Pennsylvania History* added “A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies” to its masthead. The addition was a convenience, or confession, in recognizing that the journal was publishing articles on subjects beyond the borders of the Commonwealth rather than a conviction that a definable Mid-Atlantic region existed. That question rattled around discussions of the scope and direction of the journal, and indeed even of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, for a time, but nobody fixed on a definition that was definitive. The subtitle thus served more as an invitation to scholars to send along work on “the region,” whatever that was, than as any claim to knowing what geographic, demographic, economic, conceptual, or other boundaries such a creature might have. Perhaps, the thinking went, the scholarship that came from such encouragement would settle the matter. In the meantime, any definition of the region remained fluid, and even elusive. It remains so today.

To be sure, many scholars have addressed the question of what a Mid-Atlantic was, and is, and why knowing such would matter. Scholars have variously cast the region as the “motley middle,”

largely for its location between a supposedly discernible and definite New England and South, or as no region at all but rather, in its demographic, religious, and economic diversity, really America in the making from the colonial period through the nineteenth century, or as something else. Whatever it is, or is not, scholars do agree that the Mid-Atlantic lacks the social and cultural cement of a self-conscious regionalism that holds people to place and each other as it does elsewhere. Nobody calls him- or herself a Mid-Atlantian or waves a flag of regional pride. No business brands itself as "Mid-Atlantic" to summon up bonds of loyalty among customers, for the regional label functions only as an indicator of administrative or service reach. Nobody argues how much the Mid-Atlantic is a mentality more than a distinct geographical place, as have scholars measuring the power and persistence of "southern" and "western" identities that survive, and even thrive, across time and space. No proliferation of Mid-Atlantic studies centers populates college/university campuses, as exists for regional studies in the South and West. No one profitably trades on being a Mid-Atlantic artist, or novelist, or comedian, or anything, as some do for other regions in the United States. And so on. Curiously, as the idea of region has gained currency as a way for Americans to order and manage their economic, social, and cultural worlds amid the swirl of globalizing and other forces that threaten the loss of particular identities and control over one's resources, finding and building a Mid-Atlantic identity and interest remains largely on the margins of discussion. One can fairly wonder whether searching for a Mid-Atlantic is a fool's errand.

And yet the term persists. It begs inquiry and explanation as to its form and function, at any time and over time. Thus, this special issue devoted to "Defining the Mid-Atlantic Region."

This special issue offers ways to approach and think about region as a concept and analytical tool and thereby to discover a "Mid-Atlantic," but it makes no promise of a comprehensive exploration into the question or of a consensus on what the Mid-Atlantic was, is, or might be.

What is missing from this issue points to work still needful of inquiry. The purpose here is to pose questions of region and their applicability to a "Mid-Atlantic," to chart directions and boundaries for consideration and investigation, to describe physical and human features that might distinguish a region, and to posit new definitions of region that might include

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and encompass a “Mid-Atlantic.” It also is to consider the possibility that no Mid-Atlantic exists, or ever existed, except as an intellectual construct. It is, then, as much an invitation as an investigation. And we now invite readers to engage the question.

Randall M. Miller
Saint Joseph’s University

Beverly C. Tomek
University of Houston–Victoria

Guest Editors