

## DEFINING A MID-ATLANTIC REGION

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*T*he first time my wife heard the pop song “Hopelessly Midwestern,” she turned to me and said, “That’s you.” Looking back at the lyrics, I’m not sure she was right, except perhaps referring to the opening line, “If you live life in the middle and not on the edge, You’re hopelessly Midwestern.” Knowing I grew up in Illinois, she recognized my roots, even if I would have had a hard time describing them as lasting much beyond the curse of being a lifetime Cubs fan. Aside from a decade in New Haven in college and graduate school, I have lived my entire adult life in the Mid-Atlantic, if Washington, DC, counts as much as the Philadelphia area. Yet no one would be tempted to call me “hopelessly Mid-Atlantic.” And therein lies the problem. When we articulate regional characteristics, immediate images emerge when describing New England, the South, and the West, to say nothing of the Midwest. The Mid-Atlantic proves more problematic. Historian Carl Abbot confirms that observation, recounting his experience arriving as a middle-westerner at college in the East: “I discovered that friends from New Mexico

and Georgia . . . knew that they came from regions, but that friends from New York and Philadelphia did not.”<sup>1</sup>

This conundrum assumed more than simply academic proportions when I was asked as a new arrival to Rutgers’ Camden campus in 1999 to cochair with Temple University’s Morris Vogel an initiative designed to bring new humanities resources to the Mid-Atlantic states. The source of our interest was a major challenge grant, initially envisioned as being \$5 million, to introduce a third level of program development, between state humanities councils and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The challenge was the brainchild of William Ferris, who before assuming the chairmanship of NEH had made a national reputation for himself as director of the Center for Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. Now he wanted to seed university-based centers in ten regions of the country based on the belief that “region inspires and grounds the American experience.” “Because Americans are so deeply immersed in their sense of place,” he declared in the introduction to each of the ten volumes on America’s distinct regions as defined by the NEH initiative, “we use region like a compass to provide direction as we negotiate our lives.”<sup>2</sup>

I had no problem embracing the importance of regionalism that drove Ferris’s vision. A long-time follower of journalist Neal Peirce’s citistate news column and an associated book, I was convinced by his argument that the main drivers of the modern American economy are the nation’s major metropolitan regions.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, as a student of cities, I was acutely aware of the unevenness of modern development that virtually remade some areas while leaving others behind. Looking at that experience, it appeared that those in metropolitan areas were as divided among themselves as they were set apart from those living in entirely different regional settings. However much Neal Peirce nationally or Theodore Hershberg locally repeated Benjamin Franklin’s reputed warning that we best all hang together or else we hang separately, regional coherence seemed entirely allusive.<sup>4</sup>

As scholars, we bear some of the blame for that problem. As much as our forbearers, writing especially in the years following World War II, sought to identify and disseminate the essentials of American character, subsequent scholarship has focused on particulars, notably race, class, and gender. Even a professed historian of a distinct region—the West—Patricia Limerick has described regionalism as the place where scholars go to take a nap.<sup>5</sup> If Limerick was being somewhat facetious, she nonetheless could not help

but recognize the considerable distance between scholarly priorities and lived realities, if Peirce is right, of those living in communities bound by formidable, if not always fully legible regional ties.

The journalist and social commentator Joel Garreau identified one reason for making the effort to form judgments about regional identity, however fluid they might prove over time. Describing how he came to identify the “nine nations” that constitute North America, he explained that the United States as a whole is simply too expansive and too diverse to conceive as a whole. The alternative, which was superior to state designations that seemed arbitrary indicators of cultural identity, was to recognize groupings of characteristics that helped both insiders and outsiders to those regions understand what bound them together as well as what divided them from others culturally as well as geographically.<sup>6</sup>

Abbott recounts more systematically how scholars have dealt with regions. Looking across disciplines, he recognizes a tension between particular places and broader national trends. According to prevailing modernizing theory, those areas of the country that remain distinct are inevitably pulled toward a national norm. “Place—locality and region as an amalgam of localities with things in common,” Abbott reports, “has been treated as a residual. The stronger the local attachments or the regional identification, the less the place is thought to have been influenced by modernization and incorporated within modern institutions.”<sup>7</sup> Celebrating regional differences—one readily thinks of the South—often serves as a protest against modernizing or, more broadly, homogenizing tendencies. Even Limerick’s students, though supposedly bored by the topic of regionalism, could identify with such sentiment once they were asked to name what they did not like about modern life, a list that included mass culture and mass media.<sup>8</sup>

The scholarly literature on region further suggests the contingent nature of the concept. Characteristics dominant at one point erode over time with the influx of new flows of human and monetary capital. In Abbott’s case study of Washington, DC, the dominant early influence was southern, with strong manifestations of that regional character lasting at least into the 1970s, even as the government town fell increasingly under modern influences. By the end of the twentieth century Washington had experienced substantial accommodation to the public values of the North but remained tied to the South in many ways. “The endurance of Washington’s southern character, despite strong cosmopolitan influences,” Abbott reports, “supports the larger argument for an enduring South that can modernize without

northernizing. ‘New’ has meant northern and megalopolitan, but it has also meant southern and Chesapeake.”<sup>9</sup> Such studies confirm one observation about the Mid-Atlantic—namely, that if the core of a geographic area remains resistant to change, its edges are subject to blending, with the result that over time they cease to represent borders so much as borderlands where people and cultures mix. A whole field of scholarship has developed around this concept, focusing most prominently on the reciprocal influences of Hispanic with Anglo or related cultural groups on one another.

It could be said of the Mid-Atlantic as a whole that its own identification with so many core national experiences has made it, like Abbott’s college classmates, sublimely confident of its normative standing in the national narrative. Yet such consensus-like sentiment runs counter to the diversity so manifest within the region, not the least at its edges, especially south and west, but also within the multiple metropolitan areas that help define the area as a whole as largely “modern.” Clearly, if scholars are to make use of a regional context and convey its significance to a general public as well as to fellow academics, they have to provide some guidelines for understanding the dynamics that allow for judgments about the nature of its constituent parts.

This was the challenge taken up by our regional humanities center. We believed we had an obligation not just to aggregate resources. We had, after all, very little monetary capital to add to what other, already financially stressed humanities organizations could offer. Our contribution had to lie in the academic resources that were already in hand, but according to our mandate they also had to be accessible to the general public.

My first inclination, though not recognizing it at the time, was to revert to an already established metropolitan approach. Under this interpretation, cities were identified as the central agents for the development of the Mid-Atlantic, much more so than either New England or the South, both of which lacked the ports that facilitated trade and thus dictated settlement patterns in the colonial and early national periods. Once established as key agents of growth along the Atlantic hinge with Europe, New York and Philadelphia especially in foundational years and later Baltimore and Washington, DC, linked maritime trade to their hinterlands, ultimately forging ties to the western portions of the region through emerging cities at the western hinge: Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and Rochester to name a few, with a good number of cities in between. Farmers were bound by trade to the cities, and while the rhythms of their lives may have differed from their urban counterparts, their

personal fortunes were linked by the efficacy of the ties that bound them, whether they were turnpikes or canals, railroads, or ultimately highways.

A maturing economy brought with it differentiations that divided farmers from merchants and manufacturers, natives from immigrants, cities from suburbs. The pluralism of identity and belief that gained ascendancy in the Mid-Atlantic, still within a concept of one nation, strained regional alliances, often pitting groups in close proximity against each other as much as against the collective interests found in other parts of the country. Yet even as some bemoaned fragmentation and dispersion, others embraced regional differences as essential safeguards against homogenizing national tendencies. To help us comprehend and categorize the set of changes that recast the region as it evolved, I turned to my Rutgers colleague Philip Scranton, a business historian who managed to deepen my largely social vision of the region with his expertise in economics. Together, we moved a brief description from our regional center's website into a more complete description of the Mid-Atlantic for the online *Encyclopedia of American Studies*. In that assessment, we identified four broad bands, running roughly from the northeast to the southwest:

At the Atlantic's edges from Montauk, New York, through the Chesapeake, lies a world of shores and estuaries that from the seventeenth century sustained distinctive social, economic, and cultural ways of life. Parallel to this first band—and progressively further inland—arose a string of early commercial cities and surrounding countryside that, once linked by rail and telegraph, became the nation's defining metropolitan corridor, running from New York through Newark and Trenton to Philadelphia, then through Wilmington to Baltimore and Washington. In the third and broadest band, occupying the rolling hills west to the Appalachians' modest peaks, Americans farmed the land, mined the hard coal and iron ore, and felled the trees that fed the creation of industrial and urban complexes. Last, along a line from western New York to southwestern Pennsylvania, migrants settled the cities of Buffalo, New York, and Erie, Pittsburgh, and Johnston, Pennsylvania, which developed heavy industry, especially steel and later electrical manufacturing, while initiating a further round of extraction—this time soft coal and oil. Each of these subregions drew and held dramatically different populations and became platforms on which contrasting cultural, political, and economic

milieux emerged, eventually being tied together by key East–West connectors: the National and Cumberland roads, the Erie Canal, the Pennsylvania, Baltimore & Ohio, and New York Central railroads, and ultimately auto routes including the Pennsylvania Turnpike and the New York Thruway.<sup>10</sup>

Teasing out the implications of these different sectors, we provided some examples as to how they could be mined to animate stories distinctive to the region. Looking at the coastal district we identified transitions that moved cultures of commerce ultimately to locations for recreation as, for instance, the New Jersey shore became “The Shore.” At the far western edge, the story was very different, marked by the emergence of extractive industries, the rise of manufacturing, and, more recently, the reinvention of the metropolitan economy. Pittsburgh could not have been further distant from its fellow East Coast cities, physically or emotionally, and yet by the twenty-first century Philadelphia, as well as Camden across the Delaware River, was looking to that city as a model for reinvention through its dynamic partnerships between educational and medical institutions.

Ultimately, a small organization such as our regional center, in order to maximize its impact, like good scholars, needed to take up a manageable task, in this case a demonstration project close to home. The choice, which I remain a part of in partnership with my successor as director of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities, Charlene Mires, and Randall Miller, is an encyclopedia of greater Philadelphia. Regional in the most immediate sense of encompassing a major metropolitan area, the encyclopedia does not tell the story of the Mid-Atlantic, so much as to suggest its richness. This is a case, I would hope, where sensitivity to the region as a whole might better inform the collective scholarship that goes into this effort. A few examples are in order.

The entry on the New Jersey shore is not yet in hand. Still, I envision a rich story that reminds us of the deep and not always understood ties that make region a viable category for understanding. The architectural historian George Thomas frequently describes the multiple revolutions that shaped the character of Philadelphia. Among them was a pattern of rising wages that enabled laborers to purchase modest rowhomes near their places of employment and, over time, gain the leisure time that allowed them to vacation at “The Shore” as well as other nearby regional resorts, such as the Pocono Mountains. Thomas credits the introduction of the methods of scientific

management by Frederick Winslow Taylor, who was born into the burgeoning industrial economy of the larger Philadelphia region, with rising wages for workers, a proposition that deserves further scrutiny. Still, the story of the diffusion of Taylor's methods, well before they became national practice, was a regional one, helping to explain much of the success of regional manufacturing and, possibly, resulting forms of leisure time among workers.<sup>11</sup>

Another topic still to be completed is that of "inner-ring suburbs," a phenomenon that is hardly unique to Philadelphia, but has yet to be addressed fully in metropolitan terms. These settlements, as the first to materialize outside city limits, often represented extensions of urban form, in streets and housing type, if not land use and its restrictions. They attracted the upwardly mobile in one generation, but many of their descendants have chosen to locate either further from city limits or to return to neighborhoods that are gaining value with the impetus of tax breaks combined with desirable cultural amenities. In the process of shifting settlement patterns, these older suburbs are changing identity, as both their racial and ethnic character and their politics shift. These patterns clearly contribute to the metropolitan region's shifting postindustrial identity.

Like the treatment of the region as a whole as I have described it, encyclopedia contributors need to better understand the swaths of modern settlement and their interaction with adjacent territory, at the core as well as at the periphery, if we are going to draw conclusions about the destination of the metropolitan area. A primary goal of the encyclopedia in doing that is to help its users locate themselves both in time and space. *Pennsylvania History* shares that purpose. As the Keystone state, Pennsylvania lies at the region's core. It has served in many ways to diffuse ideas and innovation as well as a gateway for peoples who moved through the region and into other parts of the country, carrying with them their ideas and their values particularly into Ohio and the central Mississippi Valley. At the periphery, Washington, DC, absorbed more of a southern culture than its northern neighbors, but, as Abbott points out, the city was itself a borderland, neither fully southern nor northern.

It may well be that region remains a place where scholars take a nap, but it is hard to deny that region remains a vital component of everyday life. We may not choose to identify as individuals as "Mid-Atlantic-ers," but the region touches us in many ways, even if we tend to take it for granted. Being more self-conscious about its evolving influence should help us sharpen and deepen our research agendas while at the same time serving an important

civic function by informing a public for whom regional considerations do not simply constitute an academic exercise.

## NOTES

1. Carl Abbott, *Political Terrain: Washington, D.C.: From Tidewater Town to Global Metropolis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1999), 20.
2. William Ferris, "Foreword," in *The Mid-Atlantic Region*, ed. Robert P. Marzec (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), viii.
3. Neal R. Peirce, *Citistates: How Urban America Can Prosper in a Competitive World* (Washington, DC: Seven Locks Press, 1993). According to the citistates website at <http://citistates.com/>, the 314 metro regions in the United States provide 84 percent of new jobs, 95 percent of high tech jobs, and 88 percent of the country's income.
4. As the founder and director of the Center for Regionalism at the University of Pennsylvania, Hershberg used Franklin's phrase on the cover of an ambitious conference handbook that culminated in raising regional awareness in greater Philadelphia. Neal Peirce served as the opening keynote speaker, May 25, 1995.
5. Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Region and Reason," in Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter S. Onuf, *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 84.
6. Joel Garreau, *The Nine Nations of North America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).
7. Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 16.
8. Limerick, "Region and Reason," 86.
9. Carl Abbott, "Dimensions of Regional Change in Washington, D.C.," *American Historical Review* 95, no. 5 (1990): 1393.
10. Philip Scranton and Howard Gillette Jr., "Mid-Atlantic Region," *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, on line at <http://eas-ref.press.jhu.edu/>.
11. Daniel Sidorick, "Scientific Management," *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, at <http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/scientific-management/>.