EVERY YEAR HUNDREDS OF UNDERGRADUATE history majors in colleges and universities across America embark on ambitious independent research projects and report their findings in lengthy senior honors essays. Many of these senior theses are imaginatively designed and well executed; some are truly original and significant; but even the best of them are usually treated as semi-private exercises. They are judged by faculty graders and admired by prideful parents—and then shelved and forgotten by everyone except their authors. As a veteran college teacher and a connoisseur of senior theses, I find this to be a real pity. In my experience, talented undergraduates often argue with a freshness and write with a verve that is extremely appealing. Accordingly, when I taught an unusually large group of twenty American history honors candidates at the University of Pennsylvania in 1986, I looked for a way of publishing some of their most interesting work. In the belief that readers of the Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography would enjoy sampling the historical research and writing of bright college students, I asked Editor Randall M. Miller and the Publications Committee to devote one issue of this magazine to a selection of Penn senior essays. This proposal was properly regarded with skepticism, because nearly all of the authors who submit articles to the PMHB are professional scholars who possess more solid command of the historical terrain and more research experience than undergraduates. Yet Miller agreed to my proposal, on condition that the undergraduate honors essays I submitted to him met the usual scholarly standards for acceptance by the PMHB.

The five authors represented here have condensed their senior essays from thesis length to article length, and then revised them further.
in response to the criticisms and suggestions they received from "blind" reviewers, academic experts (whom Miller selected) who did not know that the pieces they were assessing were written by college students. But while the resulting articles have been revised, they retain the characteristic features of the senior honors thesis. Each is based upon a relatively circumscribed corpus of documentary evidence, reflecting the fact that college students have quite limited time for independent research because they are enrolled in multiple courses and engaged in extracurricular activities or employed in part-time jobs. On the other hand, these authors communicate a special sense of discovery; they are doing history on an extensive scale for the first time, and they take pleasure in the detective work that becomes routinized habit for more seasoned researchers. They have read widely enough in the secondary literature to establish a context for their work, but they are not immersed—nor greatly interested—in the arcane historiographical controversies that preoccupy many academic scholars. They tend to see issues unambiguously, and interpret their findings without the nuanced qualifications to be found in most professional historical writing.

While the authors of these five articles address a wide range of topics, they exhibit a common ingenuity in extracting interesting findings from their source materials. In the first article, Joseph Torsella samples newspapers and magazines from 1750-1790 to chart the evolution of American national identity. Whereas a doctoral candidate who embarked on this project would probably feel compelled to survey all of the popular press, Torsella looks at newspapers from only three places during four sample years. But his strategy works, because he is able to demonstrate that the most meaningful time of change was not between 1750 and 1770, as one might anticipate, but between 1785 and 1790. The second article is a case study in business history; here David Miller recreates the life history (via eighteen voyages) of a ship operated by the Philadelphia merchant Stephen Girard in 1789-1794. Girard's business papers are so extraordinarily voluminous as to defy analysis, but by focusing on the Polly Miller is able to encapsulate Girard's mercantile style and also tell a colorful adventure story, because Girard sent this ship repeatedly to the French sugar colony of St. Domingue (now Haiti) during the great slave rebellion of the 1790s. The third article is a case study in social history; here Mark Schneyer samples the extensive records
of the Young Women’s Union, a Jewish welfare agency in South Philadelphia. Realizing that he would not have enough time to investigate the 1,500 YWU case files, dating from 1885 to 1940, that he found in the Philadelphia Jewish Archives at the Balch Institute, Schneyer focuses on the single year 1915—a depression year in Philadelphia—and thereby highlights the day-to-day problems faced by social worker C. Marion Kohn as she struggled to sustain family bonds, and keep mothers with their children, amidst a blighting environment of poverty and disease. The fourth article is in an entirely different vein; here David Goldberg explores a topic of special interest to many undergraduates, sports history. Drawing upon research in the University of Pennsylvania Archives and interviews with two of the actors in the drama, Goldberg takes an inside look at the battle over football policy at Penn in 1950-1952. He tells an ironic story of how President Harold Stassen’s strenuous efforts to continue big-time football precipitated the formation of the small-time Ivy League and the abolition of spring practice at Penn. Finally, in yet another change of pace, Eva Moskowitz compares the contents of U.S. history high school textbooks from the 1950s and 1970s. Employing a sampling technique similar to her colleagues, she chooses six textbooks from each period and finds a striking contrast between the upbeat materialism purveyed in the immediate post-World War II era and the disillusioned social criticism that was being disseminated just two decades later.

While Moskowitz does not focus specifically on a Pennsylvania topic, her essay appropriately concludes this collection. Her presentation of modern American popular culture links interestingly with Torsella’s presentation of popular culture two hundred years earlier. And her article serves to remind us that college students are primarily consumers rather than producers of history. Having been fed a steady diet of history textbooks throughout grade school, high school, and college, they have developed a healthy resistance toward the pedagogical propaganda they have imbibed—which helps to explain why, when they get the chance to do their own independent research and writing, their work is often far more lively and provocative than any textbook.

University of Pennsylvania

Richard S. Dunn