Behind the Velvet Curtain: Academic History, Historical Societies, and the Presentation of the Past

In his futuristic novel about the late twentieth century, which seemed so far away when he published 1984 in 1949, George Orwell wrote: “Who controls the past, controls the future; who controls the present, controls the past.”¹ In Orwell’s book this was an important Party slogan. It represented the conviction that historical memory, if conveyed purposively enough to the public at large, plays a vital role in getting people to believe and therefore to behave in certain ways; and that the particular memory of the past that will be presented to the public—in schools, museums, and the media—depends upon who is in charge of that task. In 1984 the Party understood that history was not simply the true story about what happened in the past; it was an interpretation of what happened and why it happened. Moreover, history did not come from the pens of impartial, dispassionate, and uninterested social scientists; rather, the keepers of the past were drawn selectively from the social ranks and, in following their craft, chose facts and wove interpretations in ways that reflected their usually elevated social position and the privileged status of the institutions in which they worked. The Party

¹ George Orwell, 1984 (New York, 1949), 204.
controlled all records of the past and all human memories of the past and thus the past itself.

Orwell’s little nugget about the power of history was much in my mind when I was asked in June 1988 to be Guest Historian for a permanent exhibition at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP) on the history of the Philadelphia region and the history of collecting at the Society. I had no intention of becoming the Party, and yet I knew that history was interpretive and that I would be in a position to shape, in collaboration with others, a particular retrieval of Philadelphia’s past. As an academic historian who has spent the last quarter-century lecturing before a few score or few hundred students at a time and writing books that can be found on the coffeetables and bookshelves of almost nobody except some specialists in early American history, I considered this an irresistible opportunity to reach out to a dizzyingly broad audience. The Historical Society expected this exhibition, its first “permanent” exhibit, to be viewed over the decade of the 1990s by hundreds of thousands of people.

But with opportunity comes responsibility (and much transcontinental travel). What, one asks, is the responsibility of one of the nation’s oldest historical societies and one of its richest in its magnificent collections in presenting an interpretation of eastern Pennsylvania as it developed historically from the era before the arrival of William Penn and the Quakers to the early twentieth century? That question leads, in turn, to one that is central to the entire study of history. What is the function of history in a democratic society and how is it best presented to the public?

My task as Guest Historian was threefold: first, to provide the intellectual framework and the guiding rationale for such an exhibit; second, to build upon that framework and carry through that rationale for an exhibit by coordinating the choice of some 470 books, paintings, manuscripts, pamphlets, broadsides, lithographs, cartoons, photo-

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2 My approach to history might in part be summed up by Edward H. Carr’s observation that the facts of history “are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger’s slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use—these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch.” Edward Hallett Carr, What is History? (New York, 1963), 26.
graphs, and museum objects; and third, with the help of the curatorial and manuscript division staffs, to write a script for the show—about forty text panels on the walls and hundreds of object labels that would identify and interpret the many objects in the exhibition and weave them together in a connected narrative about the making of the city’s history.

The Historical Society, like virtually all institutions since the 1970s, had already made the decision to go beyond the formalist or taxonomic approach that categorizes objects and presents them for their own sake. The task was to select from their extraordinary collections those objects that could best be tied together and artfully displayed in an interpretive history of the Delaware Valley for more than two centuries. The team of curators, exhibit designers, and historical advisors that I was asked to lead—people of very diverse backgrounds—would become, in effect, the custodians of the past, those in the present who, through interpreting history for today’s and tomorrow’s citizens, would, in Orwell’s terms, control the future.

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The nineteenth-century founders of institutions such as the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, as the following essay by Barbara Clark Smith and earlier published essays by other writers make clear, were not confused about this question. In the main, they were sorely troubled by the sprawling, turbulent, heterogeneous character of the industrializing nineteenth-century cities, and they considered the col-

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lecting of books, manuscripts, and objects of the past a way to restore some sense—their own sense—of unity and order through the presentation of a history of a less trammeled, more virtuous, and less materialistic era.

In Philadelphia the principal architect of that reconstruction of history was John Fanning Watson, who worked behind the scenes in the early 1820s to induce a group of Philadelphia’s patrician leaders to establish a historical society. Watson was personally convinced that the measured, orderly, and relatively virtuous world of the colonial period had fallen before an onslaught of undisciplined, uncouth, and insubordinate groups—especially those not of colonial English origin—that were spilling through Philadelphia’s increasingly noisy, crowded, and violent streets. A kind of mid-Atlantic Brahmin, he loathed the forces unleashed by immigration, industrialization, and democratization. In 1800, as a twenty-one-year-old clerk in the nation’s raw new capital of Washington, Watson found his fellows at the boardinghouse of Peggy Eaton’s father “vicious, democratic, and
dissipated." To Watson's mind, an institution devoted to collecting historical manuscripts and artifacts might promote a view of earlier days—what we call the colonial period—when Pennsylvanians were more righteous, hardworking, and thrifty, and, if they were in the lower orders, more deferential and unassertive. In Watson's nostalgic conception, such an institutional endeavor might spread the values of genteel culture and impart a shared sense of identity among Philadelphians who, in the boisterous 1820s, seemed to be pulling in every direction while forgetting their precious heritage.

The memory of the past that the founders of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania wished to cultivate was one that legitimated order, authority, and status; and order meant that each person knew his or her rank and place and deferred to those above them. Also, it was a society where change occurred because of the wisdom and work of great leaders. Looking back from the 1820s, these were William Penn, the founder; James Logan, the scientist and statesman; Benjamin Franklin, the diplomat, scientist, and promoter of civic improvements; and a panoply of Revolutionary heroes from Washington and Jefferson to Adams and Dickinson. Great men made history; ordinary people followed their lead. Watson's founding vision, and the philosophical underpinning of his Annals of Philadelphia . . . in the Olden Time, are apt examples of what the English historian J.H. Plumb has called the "confirmatory" character of annals throughout

6 The role of other genteel urbanites in founding historical societies—men such as William Appleton in Boston and I. Phelps Stokes in New York—demands attention. A good introduction is Julian P. Boyd, "State and Local Historical Societies in the United States," American Historical Review 40 (Oct. 1934), 10-37. For an overview of the development of historical societies, with little attention to the social or ideological context in which the societies' founders lived, see Whitehall, Independent Historical Societies. In her Henry Chapman Mercer and the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works (Philadelphia, 1987), Cleota Reed offers some useful suggestions about Mercer's vision as it related to his building of the Bucks County (Pa.) Historical Society in the late nineteenth century. For a discussion of the founding of societies by "gentlemen," see Barbara Clark Smith's essay, "The Authority of History: The Changing Public Face of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania," in this issue of the PMHB.
history in every society—annals as a "narration of events of particular people, nations or communities in order to justify authority, to create confidence and to secure stability." Watson’s re-creation of Philadelphia’s past would confirm what seemed to his class the disappearing genteel present.

This use of history as a weapon of authority did not mean that commonplace elements of life were of no interest. John Fanning Watson, as his Annals of Philadelphia testify, was fascinated with the landscape and character of daily life—the look of Philadelphia’s eighteenth-century buildings; the way the city functioned, from its water system and wharves to its tavern life and theatres; the dress, eating and drinking habits, amusements, and lifeways of the people. He had an eye for the picaresque figures who strolled the preindustrial city and the “superstitions and popular credulity” of the people. He interviewed dozens of old people, including Abduhl Rahaman, an African prince, brought to America as a slave, who had made his way from a plantation in Natchez, Mississippi, to Philadelphia. Yet Watson’s was a limited and conservative presentation of the past, because he had little empathy for the strivings of immigrants and those who began at the bottom, gave only passing notice to women and blacks, or a variety of other “outsiders,” and had no interest in the abrasive relations between different groups in society that were frequently a part of the colonial past and were endemic to the Revolutionary period. Of Philadelphia’s 1820s black community, which had created a notable number of independent churches, schools, and mutual aid societies, he wrote sneeringly: “Their aspiring and little vanities have been rapidly growing since they got those separate churches . . . Thirty to forty years ago [that is, when they were just emerging from slavery] they were much humbler, more esteemed in their place, and more useful to themselves and others.” Nor was the competitive race for material rewards among artisans much to his liking. “When I was a boy [that is, in the 1790s],” he wrote, “there was no such

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10 Ibid., 2:261.
thing as conducting their business in the present wholesale manner, and by efforts at monopoly. No masters were seen exempted from personal labor in any branch of business—living on the profits derived from many hired journeymen.” Such comments tell us that Watson was thoroughly a man of his day and of his class.

In his *Annals of Philadelphia*, and in his vision of a historical society, Watson did not perpetrate a view of the past in any conspiratorial way. He merely reflected a historical consciousness from his social vantage point. His angle of vision was fairly typical among those who wrote history, virtually all members of the elite at this time and, indeed, throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century. Yet his *Annals* and his role in founding the Historical Society had a strong philosophical and political content.

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The “personal ownership of the past” that “has always been a vital strand in the ideology of all ruling classes,” as J.H. Plumb expresses it, has changed hands very dramatically in our own lifetimes, but this does not mean that history—or historical exhibitions—are any less philosophical or political in their conceptualization. *Ownership* is an apt word to employ when thinking about the uses of history, because the term conveys the idea of history as a form of property (indeed very valuable property, if Orwell is correct). In thinking about property it is useful to remember that in premodern and feudal societies property was narrowly concentrated; those without it were not entitled to participate in the political process. It was against these features of traditional societies that enlightened thinkers from the English Civil War of the mid-seventeenth century to the American Revolution arrayed themselves. Following a line of political theory that traced back to ancient Greece, they argued that when property was held by the few, then political power would equally be vested in the few. This was called oligarchy. “Where there is inequality of estates,” wrote the influential late seventeenth-century English writers

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11 Ibid., 1:240-41.
James Harrington and Algernon Sidney, “there must be inequality of power,” for “there is no maxim more infallible and holding in any science, than this in politics; that empire is founded in property.” Cato’s Letters, the influential eighteenth-century essays on political theory by Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard, made the same point: “A Free people are kept so by no other means but an equal distribution of property.” This was by no means an ideology of radicals. Conservatives such as Noah Webster reflected the view of many well-to-do Americans of the Revolutionary generation when he wrote, in 1787, at a time when Watson was a youth:

An equality of property with a necessity of alienation [dispossession], constantly operating to destroy combinations of powerful families, is the very soul of a republic. While this continues, the people will inevitably possess both power and freedom; when this is lost power departs [from them], liberty expires, and a commonwealth will inevitably assume some other form.

Conservatives and radicals alike fostered an egalitarian ideology linking property to political freedom.

While the redistribution of property—and therefore political power—was accomplished many generations ago, it has taken until the era following World War II to redistribute the property in history. This is at first glance peculiar because it might be supposed that a democratic society might produce historians and teachers of history who would present the past with some attention to democratic values and with a less elitist notion of how historical change occurs. But what is a democratic sensibility regarding history and historical change? At root, it involves a devotion to presenting a past not sugar-coated but instead offering details about all constituent parts of society. Only by examining such details can we fully understand a society’s development, its key transformations, its accomplishments, and its failures. History written in this way implicitly seeks to overcome the “great man” theory of history. Thomas Carlyle, writing in the middle

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15 Noah Webster, An Examination into the Leading Principles of the Federal Constitution Proposed by the late Convention held at Philadelphia . . . (Philadelphia, 1787), 47.
of the nineteenth century, averred that "the History of the world is but the Biography of great men," and, in the American case, he might have inserted the adjective "white" before "men." It cannot be denied that great men, white or otherwise, have played important roles in history, acting heroically or despicably to change the course of local, national, or international events. But the vital task in presenting history is to show the interaction between the "great" (political and religious leaders, scientific geniuses, captains of industry, and military officers) with the mass of ordinary people, and to show how each group influenced the other.

That history is with the people, and that a more accurate portrait of historical change must include the roles of people of all classes and conditions is not the discovery of historians in the 1980s. About the time Carlyle was trumpeting the great man theory of history, the American social commentator and park planner Frederick Law Olmsted was warning that

Men of literary taste . . . are always apt to overlook the working-classes, and to confine the records they make of their own times, in a great degree, to the habits and fortunes of their own associates or to those of people of superior rank to themselves. . . . The dumb masses have often been so lost in this shadow of egotism, that, in later days, it has been impossible to discern the very real influence their character and condition has had on the fortune and fate of nations.17

Since 1856, when Olmsted penned these words, a long but thin line of historians has attempted to adopt an inclusive approach to historical change. The closest American historians came to accomplishing this before our own time was during the early twentieth century when the so-called Progressive historians argued for the role of ordinary people in history, especially the working classes. However, almost all of these historians were inattentive to gender and rarely

17 Frederick Law Olmsted, A Journey in the Seaboard Slaves States with Remarks on Their Economy (New York, 1859), 214-15. Olmsted was a conservative reformer and hardly egalitarian, but his message was one that resonated through the decades and became embodied in the twelve-volume History of American Life series conceived in the early twentieth century by Dixon Ryan Fox and Arthur Schlesinger.
overcame the virulently racist thinking of the period that consigned people of color to the historical dustbin. A few early advocates of women and racial minorities took up the cudgels for these groups, but their work never much penetrated textbook treatments of American history and, as Michael Wallace and others have pointed out, never found a place in the great public recreations of the past, such as Colonial Williamsburg and Henry Ford's Greenfield Village, that have shaped the historical consciousness of millions of Americans since the 1930s. Moreover, such early advocacy of a more democratically conceptualized history slumped badly when the "Consensus school," that stressed the absence of conflict in American history, rose to prominence during the Cold War era following World War II.

The writing of a national history sensitive to gender, race, and class has proceeded rapidly since the early 1960s in ways that would have pleased Olmsted but by no means please some elder statesmen and stateswomen of the profession today. Some of the explanation for the striking changes in our understanding of the past resides in the many-sided struggle for social and racial justice in the 1960s that sparked an interest among many historians in the historical roots of the black struggle and feminism. Perhaps even more of the change in historical interest and interpretation relates to the changing composition of the historical profession after World War II. Before that time, the profession was a bastion of privileged white males, most of whom were Protestant. This has changed markedly since the end of World War II, first in terms of the class origins of people trained in graduate history programs, and second, more recently, in terms of large numbers of women entering the profession. Change has been incremental, however, in the racial composition of the profession, although the civil rights movement, beginning in the mid-1950s, and the black power movement that followed it inspired many white historians to focus their research and teaching on the history of racial minorities in the United States.

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What we have witnessed in the last generation, then, is the redistribution of “property” in history. It is precisely this redistribution, I would argue, that has invigorated and increased the popularity of history. People who find in accounts of the past people like themselves—alike in color or class, religion or region, sex or social situation—cannot help but find history more vibrant and useful than if it simply related the story of a few great white men who by themselves made history while the puppet masses danced at the ends of their strings. History that speaks of the roles of African Americans in building a society in North America and tells of ancient black struggles against oppression is empowering for those who read it because it conveys a sense of a past that is not inevitably determined by outside forces but subject to human will—what historians call human agency. A consciousness of the past, or what might be called historical literacy, quickens people to their own ability to contribute to a different future. History that unveils the role of women, not just in the home

20. The popularization of history after World War II is traced and analyzed by Roy Rosenzweig in “American Heritage and Popular History in the United States,” in Susan Porter Benson, et al., eds., Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public (Philadelphia, 1986), 21-49. Between 1954 and 1984 the American public (particularly the white middle class) bought 40 million copies of American Heritage, and the books produced by its editors, some 200 titles, sold in huge numbers as well. The initial approach of the slick hardcover American Heritage was decidedly populist. “The faith that moves us,” its editor wrote, “is, quite simply, the belief that our heritage is best understood by a study of things that the ordinary folk of America have done and thought and dreamed since first they began to live there.” As Rosenzweig shows, however, the actual editorial practices of the magazine were far more traditional and elitist than this statement would indicate. The rise of public history in the 1970s and 1980s has brought history to the public consciousness and has enabled historians to engage with a much broader constituency than that served by American Heritage.

and in their reproductive roles but in the manifold social, economic, religious, and political workings of society, is empowering for women who read it, because it links them to their past, provides a sense of their place in the long march of time, and, again, provides examples that they do not necessarily live under a biological tyrant but can play a role in shaping their existence and that of their society. If presented inclusively, history has a powerful potential to impart a sense of individuality, of the possibilities of choice, of the human capacity both for good and evil, of the importance of the individual, even in mass society. For Frederick Nietzsche this vision of history stood in stark contrast to the mere act of collecting and memorizing facts, an activity he likened to “laborious beetle-hunters climbing up the pyramids of antiquity.”

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With these ruminations in mind, we can proceed to the specific problem—how to present to a wide and varied public, from the holdings of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (holdings which embrace some fifteen million manuscripts, rare books, newspapers, graphics, paintings, and other significant historical artifacts), an exhibit on the history of the Philadelphia region and of the Society itself. The exhibition has the dual purpose of presenting the rich history of the Philadelphia region from the era preceding the grant of Pennsylvania to William Penn in 1681 through the early twentieth century; and reconstructing the history of Philadelphia collecting and the process whereby cultural institutions, in formulating and pursuing particular collecting strategies, are bound by the vision and priorities of their time.

Early on, the HSP exhibition planners decided to focus on the Philadelphia region. The Society’s founders had defined as their goal “the elucidation of the natural, civil, and literary history” of Pennsylvania, but the Society’s collections in the nineteenth century began

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to acquire a breadth that extended far beyond the state. Nevertheless, by narrowing the spatial boundaries of the exhibit, sacrificing breadth for depth, it became possible to plumb the multi-layered character of a city that has had enormous importance in the nation’s history. We wanted visitors to leave this exhibition with a new appreciation of how people of many origins, of all classes and conditions, lived in Philadelphia and contributed to its making; and we wanted them to leave with fresh perspectives on what historical societies are, what collecting means, how it has come to change, and how historical understanding has been fashioned in part by the dialogue the HSP has carried on with history through the way it assembled its collections. Furthermore, we aimed at showing frankly how, for all their monumental qualities, the Society’s collections have notable limitations.

One of these limitations, the marked falling off of three-dimensional materials relating to the twentieth century, dictated a late nineteenth century cut-off point for the displayed objects. To do so, however, threatened any sense of the connectedness of the past, present, and future. To usher visitors out the door at the point where the exhibit had brought them through the first two centuries of Philadelphia’s history would seem to leave the modern city the viewers know unconnected with the past. Our solution to this was to recreate an early twentieth-century streetcar at the end of the exhibition, where visitors would step aboard and, through a rich montage of period photographs from the Society’s vast collection and through silent film footage, be transported visually and through voice-over narration into various neighborhoods of the brawny industrial city and into the modern world of production, consumption, social problems, and reform movements.

While adopting the dual purpose of presenting the history of the city and the history of collecting, we decided that the two themes did not deserve equal weight. Rather, the history of collecting was to be made subordinate to the history of the region itself. While the mysteries of collecting could be disclosed subtly and intermittently, first and foremost, we wanted visitors to gain a palpable sense of what it was like to live in the city during different eras, in the midst

of epic changes brought about, for example by the Revolution, industrialization, and the Civil War. Within the limits of the 5,000 square feet of space allotted, we wanted visitors to see, hear, and feel how Philadelphians, in all their variety—child and adult, female and male, black and white, immigrant and native-born, rich and poor—experienced and influenced the course of urban life during times of growth and depression, celebration and crisis, confidence and confusion. In short, we wanted them to find a Philadelphia that they barely know.

In the exhibit we also wanted to show historians at work continually reinterpreting the past not only on the basis of newly discovered evidence but also on a reevaluation of old evidence in the light of new ideas that spring from the individual historian's own life and times. Our message is that in its purest definition, history is literally what happened in the past. But written history—and history presented in exhibitions—ought to be understood as a dialogue (and frequently an argument) among historians not only about past events but more importantly about how and why change came about as it did. As soon as historians take up this question of causality, they begin to disagree; these disagreements emanate from the way historians, as they look backward in time, consciously or unconsciously view their own world in ways that relate to their personal values, experiences, and ideologies.

The intent, then, was to treat the dominant theme—the history of the Philadelphia region—in ways that conveyed the gnarled, contingent, and sometimes paradoxical processes of change and the way that historians, from John Fanning Watson forward, have understood these transformations. In addressing the secondary theme, the process by which historical societies became instrumental in transmitting historical memory from one generation to another, we meant to awaken visitors to what it means to collect the documentary, artifactual, and artistic records of the past: why certain people such as the founders of the Historical Society attempted to institutionalize the yen for collecting in the 1820s, how what they collected and did not collect itself influences the collective memory of the past, and how the collecting consciousness of the institution has changed over time.

The idea that people see their history through different lenses depending on who they are, when they are doing the seeing, and what experiences and ideas they carry to the act of looking backward brought to mind the ingenuity of Philadelphia's quintessential eigh-
teenth-century citizen, Benjamin Franklin. Printer Ben had invented bifocal glasses for people who needed their sight adjusted so they could see the world clearly in both short and long perspectives. We were engaged in something of the same sort—getting people to see the world of the past more clearly, both the world that actually was and the world suggested by the way historical materials were collected. Using Benjamin Franklin’s double-purpose spectacles as a signature for the exhibit encourages visitors to think about the construction of history and the meaning of historical artifacts. In object labels that go beyond identification of the particular painting, book, or three-dimensional artifact, we have invited exhibit-goers to consider an item through two or three or even four lenses.

Consider, for example, a silver coffeepot crafted by Joseph Richardson, Jr., one of Philadelphia’s premier silversmiths before the Revolution. Such a coffeepot normally would be viewed rather singularly as a handsome example of high-style eighteenth-century craftsmanship—as an elegantly crafted and intrinsically valuable work of art. Through a second lens, the coffeepot can be seen as a crucial piece of evidence in tracing the new meaning of gentility in the eighteenth century. Gradually, in both England and the colonies, people developed a new sense of refinement, acted out in elegant manners, witty conversation, and graceful movements on occasions that depended on the importation of new beverages from exotic ports of call—in this case coffee beans from South America. Through a third lens, the Richardson coffeepot can be considered, although not actually seen, with regard to the organization and rhythms of work of the artisan who crafted the object. Behind the coffeepot lay a work process involving small workshop production and a layered artisan world that linked together the work of apprentices, journeymen, and

25 This double re-envisioning led to some thorny moments in thinking of a title for the exhibit. The Advisory Committee found my suggestion—“Re-envisioning the Past” too ponderous and academic; thus we tried variations such as “Creating the Past” (confusing because it suggested history as simply myth), “Inheriting America” (too much emphasis on the collecting theme), “Travels in Time” (catchy but too amorphous), and finally found our way to “Finding Philadelphia: Making and Collecting an American Past,” a title that worked well with the bi-focal theme since people put on their glasses to look for objects or to clarify their vision. In September 1989, for marketing reasons, the title was then changed to “Finding Philadelphia’s Past: Visions and Revisions.”
Coffeepot, Joseph Richardson, Sr., ca. 1754.

Gorget, Joseph Richardson, Sr., ca. 1760. Note the theme of Indian-Quaker amity.
William Savery's cabinetmaker's saw (ca. 1740-1787). In 1750, approximately ten years after completing his apprenticeship, Savery called himself a chairmaker.

Benjamin Franklin's lead cutter (ca. 1740-1760). Franklin always was proud of his work in the printing trade. He was the first in America to make his own type.
Hatter's parade apron, centennial of Washington's birth, from the parade in which hatters marched together, 1832.

*The Gold and Silver Artificers of Philadelphia in Civic Procession*, lithograph, 1832.
RUN away from the Subscriber Yesterday, a Mulattoe Man Slave, named Joe, alias Joseph Boudron, a middle sized Man, a brisk lively Fellow, about 23 Years of Age, was born at Guadalupe, has lived some Time in New-York, and Charles-Town, in South-Carolina, speaks good English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese; Had on when he went away, an old whitish coloured Broadcloth Coat, faced with Plush, and Metal Buttons, a Calicoe Jacket, black knit Breeches, blue Worsted Stockings, new Shoes, with large Brass Buckles, Check Shirt, an old laced Hat, and has other Things not known; he is a good Cook, and much used to the Seas, where it is thought he intends, or for New-York.

Any Person that takes up said Runaway, and brings him to me, or secures him in any Goal in this Province, shall have Two Pittacles Reward, and if in any other Province, Four Pittacles, and reasonable Charges, paid by me.

Thomas Bartholomew, Junier.

N.B. All Masters of Vessels and others are desired not to carry him off, or harbour him, on any Account.

master craftsmen. Finally, behind the coffee-pot—absent from the view of the lovely pot itself—resided the role of the craftsmen in the political and social life of a preindustrial port town such as Philadelphia.

Print materials provide another example of the opportunities we saw to encourage reflection on the double or triple meanings that are buried in pieces of the past. We tried to convey how even books, broadsides, and items in newspapers tell us more than we generally expect. A runaway slave advertisement of the sort that appeared regularly in Philadelphia’s newspapers indicates, at first glance, simple resistance to slavery on the part of imported Africans or their children born in America. But careful attention to the language of the advertisement can reveal that slaves often renamed themselves to acquire a dignity their owners did not allow in giving them a single, abbreviated first name, and were among the most expert linguists in eighteenth-century Pennsylvania (“Joe, alias Joseph Boudron . . . speaks good English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese”). Many were accomplished craftsmen (“Abel . . . a smith by trade”), and some
took on roles as preachers among slaves ("Run away . . . a Negro Man, named Dick, commonly call’d Preaching Dick, aged about 27 Years"). From a simple advertisement we can garner much important cultural information about the past from the points of view of the empowered and the enslaved.

While constructing many object labels to direct the visitor's attention to the multiple meanings that can be extracted from particular objects, we also attempted to draw attention to the history of collecting and the ideological context in which collecting decisions were made. At various points in the exhibition we point out when the Historical Society acquired a particular object or manuscript, why it had an appeal, and how it now may have acquired a new importance for historians. For example, like other Americans, Philadelphians recognized the Civil War as a political and cultural crisis and a moment of extraordinary historical poignancy and importance. This communal sense of an important historical turning point set off a collecting binge, particularly of militaria—swords, uniforms, regimental colors, and the like. But while cultural institutions generally got what they wanted, they often got some surprises as well. For example, the highly collectible personal papers and records of eminent Philadelphians contain important evidence about groups in which the HSP was not particularly interested, because those who functioned at the top of society as employers, landlords, creditors, municipal leaders, and philanthropists were placed by their very social roles in close contact with city dwellers inhabiting the "lower" ranks or defined in one way or another as "outsiders." The papers of eminent Philadelphians, used by historians a generation or two ago to reveal life at the top of society, have been used more recently to disclose life in the middle and at the bottom. To a great extent, the collections acquired to reveal life in one sector of society (the "upper" level) have been used to disclose life in an entirely different sector (the "lower" one).

The Historical Society's collections, like those of all collecting institutions, are asymmetrical and must therefore be supplemented with the holdings of other repositories if we are ever truly to find

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Philadelphia. Wanting to call attention to this while celebrating the richness of the Society’s holdings, we decided to introduce a very small number of “gap-fillers.” They were to be presented as enlarged photographs of objects, manuscript records, and printed words from other institutions in the city: for example, the Library Company of Philadelphia, which has a magnificent collection of published pamphlets and prints; the Archives of the City of Philadelphia, which holds many civil records (such as wills, inventories of estates taken at death, naturalization records, tax lists, court records, and records of poor relief agencies) indispensable to social historians studying life in the middle and lower levels of society; and the American Philosophical Society, which has a vast array of public and private documents that complement the Historical Society’s holdings. The message that history is to be found in many places is carried through to the conclusion of the exhibit, where visitors are reminded that every attic,
Printed wood stamp issued to William Browne, Jan. 5, 1762. This woodstamp, a forerunner of today's food stamp, entitled Browne to firewood in the severe winter of 1761-1762.

church vault, cemetery, and file cabinet in home or business contains untold pieces of the past.

All of the above may be made clearer by using two examples of how we have attempted to present a complex and frankly controversial past to the public in ways that we believe will challenge and stimulate their thinking about history and historical societies. The examples are the American Revolution and the Civil War.

In treating the Revolution, most textbooks ignore the principle of inclusiveness, passing over the experiences and the contributions of large groups in colonial society or simply homogenizing all colonial Americans into one undifferentiated mass, except for the Loyalists who are pictured as those too timid or too self-interested to join "the glorious cause." Thus the popular understanding of the Revolution is based mostly on the great man theory of history. Washington, Jefferson, John and Samuel Adams, Franklin, and a few other political and military leaders occupy center stage; precious few ordinary figures even wait in the wings. Moreover, the history of the Revolution is taught primarily as a war for independence with little if any attention to the "war at home," the struggle to redefine the nature of social relations and politics in America, which was carried on much more
Printed wood stamp issued to William Browne, Jan. 5, 1762. This woodstamp, a forerunner of today's food stamp, entitled Browne to firewood in the severe winter of 1761-1762.

church vault, cemetery, and file cabinet in home or business contains untold pieces of the past.

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All of the above may be made clearer by using two examples of how we have attempted to present a complex and frankly controversial past to the public in ways that we believe will challenge and stimulate their thinking about history and historical societies. The examples are the American Revolution and the Civil War.

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systematically (and at times ferociously) than the war itself. Most textbooks thereby present the Revolution in a two-dimensional manner, smothering its complexity, robbing it of much of its democratic force, and underplaying the contingency of outcomes.

It is telling that most treatments of the American Revolution used in the schools virtually ignore the complicated process of drafting state constitutions. The recent immigrant Thomas Paine—who was influential in debates about the Pennsylvania state constitution—captured some of the millennialism of the moment in his widely read *Common Sense*: “We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation similar to the present has not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand.”

Casting themselves into a state of nature after renunciating the English charters and law under which their societies functioned, the Americans had to begin anew, deciding just what kind of laws, political structures, and constitutionally protected liberties they wished to live under and by what means they should create these new governmental arrangements.

This was the opportunity, but it was also the problem, for if the slate had been wiped clean, people did not agree on what now to write on it. United in their desire to begin anew and create a regenerated society, they were at the same time divided by region, class, religion, ethnicity, and a keen sense of their own historical experiences in the colonial period, both in relation to the mother country and to each other. They brought different agendas to the bargaining table. Indeed, in some states it took nearly the entire course of the war for all the chips to be played and the solution framed.

Why has the American Revolution been sanitized in the textbooks, emptied of all drama except that which flows from the battle of David against Goliath, the guerillas against the gorillas? Perhaps the answer resides in the ancient feeling that the responsibility of those who present history to the public is to inculcate *amor patrie*, and that this is best accomplished through showing a nation’s past in untarnished, heroic terms. Such stainless steel versions of our Revolution are not likely to nurture active citizenship or encourage the moral, political,

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and social inquiry that is indispensable in a living democracy. Frederick Douglass's words are worth remembering in this regard: "Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters."  

A more realistic view of the American Revolution is more likely to inculcate a commitment to democratic principles than the simplistic, great man view of the Revolution offered in most of the schools today. The Revolution is an epic example of the role played by people at many levels of society, in many regions, from different backgrounds, and of different points of view. Nearly all of the colonists were involved in the revolutionary movement to some degree. Almost all had to make difficult choices, decide what freedom was worth, and personally calculate whether the revolutionists promised the kind of freedoms they were interested in. A great many were eager to participate in the making of their own history and the shaping of the society under which they and their children would live. Some saw more of their agenda for America accomplished than others. Some suffered keen disappointment but drew upon Revolutionary principles, as they understood them, to continue their struggles after the Revolution. Nearly all were drawn into the civic process in one way or another and became part of an often disorderly but also exhilarating campaign not only to win a war but to define the future of the American republic.

The ruminations of John Adams on the American Revolution, conveyed to a friend who was writing a history of the event in 1805, are worth recalling. Reflecting on one of the Revolutionary figures who gets little play in the textbooks except for his authorship of one galvanizing pamphlet, Adams wrote of Thomas Paine: he was "a mongrel between pig and puppy, begotten by a wild boar on a bitch wolf." Adams added that "never before in any age of the world" was such a "poltroon" allowed "to run through such a career of mischief." Yet Adams was an astute observer as well as maker of history. Thus he added to these acerbic remarks: "I know not whether

any man in the world has had more influence on its inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years than Tom Paine... I am willing you should call this the Age of Frivolity, and would not object if you had named it the Age of Folly, Vice, Frenzy, Brutality, Daemons, Buonaparte, Tom Paine, or the Age of the Burning Brand from the Bottomless Pit, or anything but the Age of Reason... Call it then the Age of Paine.”

Following Adams’s *double entendre*, we have tried to suggest more pain as well as Paine in our presentation of the American Revolution by pointing to the diversity, struggle, contingency, competing points of view, and compromise that occurred. Why should it be disguised that in Philadelphia artisans and shopkeepers, at some crucial moments, took over leadership of the Revolutionary agitation against English policies and pushed their social superiors along the road to independence rather than be led by these former political leaders into the war? Why should the public not understand how the state convention drafted a radical constitution that appalled moderates like John Adams, because it gave the vote to propertyless white males, emasculated the executive’s role, and created a unicameral legislature—all enough to make a former Revolutionary stalwart like Doctor Benjamin Rush complain of the “rascally government” that the constitution created and the lament of the “mob government” that had replaced “one of the happiest governments in the world.” Why should we hide the fact that the Revolution provided the one-fifth of the population that suffered in slavery the greatest opportunity for resistance to bondage in the history of America and that many responded by fleeing to the British and fighting against the Americans in large numbers?

In presenting the Philadelphia experience in the Revolution, we have invited visitors to adjust their angle of vision by considering this both as a war against England and a complex and fascinating ne-

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negotiation between different groups of patriots about what kind of independent society they wished to create and about which parts of the past they wished to preserve and which to discard. We try to show how it divided neighbors, families, churches, and social and occupational groups. Rather than re-invoke the Revolution in mythic proportions, we attempt to present it according to our understanding of how people at the time, in all their varied stations, experienced it—as an event that was, by turns, exhilarating and terrifying, magnificent and mundane, heroic and tragic, divisive and binding. We show, for example, that as Pennsylvanians veered toward war in 1775-1776, not all were of one mind concerning independence and how to create *novus ordo seclorum*. German pietists and most Quakers adopted a pacifist neutrality. Many hundreds of other Philadelphians, including Benjamin Franklin's son, remained loyal to the King of England. Hundreds of slaves sought personal independence by joining the British. Pennsylvanians fought bravely in the Continental Army but some mutinied, demanding back pay. Many Philadelphians died at the battles of Brandywine and Germantown, and many others welcomed the consequent British occupation of the capital city. Within the patriot ranks sharp disagreements arose, culminating in the controversy in 1779 over profiteering and price-fixing that led to bloodshed at the “Fort Wilson riot” where patriot maimed patriot. Our visitors will see that depending on the lens used, the Revolution was bright or dark. Liberty for some involved the denial of liberty for others, as when military authorities muzzled the Tory press in the city in 1778 or when the militia arrested twenty Philadelphia Quaker pacifists asserted to be British sympathizers and the state's Supreme Executive Council, suspending due process for the duration of the war, exiled them to Virginia without trial.

A second example of how we have tried to involve the public in a new understanding of the past is the Civil War. In evoking Philadelphia's history during the Civil War, we began with the understanding that the great rift in the Union is etched into the collective consciousness, at least in the North, as a great patriotic epoch when people of all kinds clasped hands to preserve the Union. Moreover, the national fascination with Civil War battles has been so enduring that it is scarcely contemplated how the war was fought on the homefront or how the war brought about the changes that outlasted the sounds of cannon and rifles. “Patriotic gore” is the phrase Edmund
Mezzotint engraving by John Sartrain, Philadelphia, 1872, after Peter Rothermel’s heroic painting, The Battle of Gettysburg, Pa., July 3rd, 1863, in which Rothermel romantically portrays individual courage of Union soldiers.
Wilson used some years ago to describe the national memory of the Civil War era. In our view, the challenge was to overcome this conception, to show the diversity of experiences and attitudes among Philadelphians involved in the great conflict.

Our attempt is to show that the war was anything but heroic for most of its participants, that the experiences of the war were as varied as those involved in it, both on the battlefield and the homefront, and that Philadelphia was a divided city in several ways during much of the war, just as it had been during the American Revolution. We display the heroic art and militaria so fascinating to many Americans and tell our visitors how the Historical Society avidly collected such material because its Republican members supported the war as a defense of the Constitution and the Union, unlike many of their Democratic party opponents.

We address this northern division of opinion about the war in ways that we suspect will surprise exhibit-goers. Some of this division occurred because of the ability of the affluent to avoid the war either by raising bounties to attract volunteers to fill local quotas or after a draft law was passed in 1863 by hiring substitutes to fight in their place. Division also festered because many prominent Philadelphians had business and family interests in the South that cooled their ardor about a war between the states. Even some of the HSP's thoroughly Republican members had close ties with the southern slaveholding aristocracy, including the president of the Society during the war, Joseph R. Ingersoll. Also feeding division was the character of antebellum politics. Much of the city had been Democratic, and Democrats were anything but abolitionists. The pro-southern cast of the Democratic party in the state can be judged by the fact that its chairman in 1860 was Robert Tyler, son of the Virginia president John Tyler and an avid friend of slavery, and by the statement of the Democratic party state convention in the summer of 1862, where it was declared that "this is a government of white men, and was established exclusively for the white race; . . . the Negro race are not entitled to and ought not to be admitted to political and social equality with the white race."^{32}

The Palmetto Flag, a pro-secession newspaper published in Philadelphia in early 1861. After Fort Sumter a mob threatened to destroy the paper's offices if the editor did not pull down the Palmetto Flag, symbol of secession.

Draft raffle drum (ca. 1863-1865). After the initial enthusiasm for the war cooled, Union authorities resorted to the draft. The lottery drum was used to select names at random, but laboring people resented the draft because they could not afford to hire substitutes to avoid conscription.
Another aspect of our presentation of the war concerns what happened on the homefront. As a staging area and a vital industrial center for the production of war materiel, Philadelphia drew upon the energies and talents of thousands of women as hospital nurses, munitions workers, seamstresses, and charity organizers. Another aspect of the war at home concerns those higher up on the social scale. Philadelphia's industrial entrepreneurs made huge profits as suppliers of weapons, uniforms, and other supplies, while financiers like Jay Cooke reaped a fortune through his innovative and daring approach to financing the war through U.S. bonds that appealed to the working family as well as wealthy individuals.

Finally, we confront the problem of race that endured throughout the war in the North as well as the South. We present one of the main paradoxes of the war—that while the abolition of slavery was one of its most important results, the long and devastating conflict did little to alter white racial attitudes in the North. The most poignant evidence of this is to be found in the controversy over the segregationist policies of most of Philadelphia's streetcar companies, which, during
Union Volunteer Refreshment Saloon cruets (ca. 1861-1865, maker unknown). The refreshment saloons and other volunteer efforts served tens of thousands of soldiers stationed in or passing through Philadelphia.

Photograph by Frederick Gutekunst of the Second Corps Hospital at Gettysburg, 1863. Philadelphia's Christian Commission, a volunteer relief organization, staffed the field hospital, which served several thousand wounded soldiers at Gettysburg.
Come Join Us Brothers, a lithograph, 1864, published by the Supervisory Committee for Recruiting Colored Regiments. It was not until Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania in June 1863 that local opposition to the use of black troops yielded. Free blacks and escaped slaves welcomed the opportunity to fight for freedom and Union.
Petition for the Colored People of Philadelphia to Ride in the Cars, 1862, circulated by the Social, Cultural and Statistical Association of Colored People of Philadelphia in order to combat racial prejudice.
the war, refused to allow the wives of wounded black soldiers to ride the cars to the hospitals where their husbands were confined or to permit soldiers from Philadelphia's numerous black regiments trained at Camp William Penn to the north of the city to ride the cars while on leave. A public referendum in 1865 soundly defeated a proposal to allow black riders, leaving it to the state legislature to end streetcar segregation two years later. White Pennsylvanians carried their ante-bellum racial attitudes into the Reconstruction era, making the black struggle to obtain voting rights a bloody one.

History, realistically presented, and with attention to people in all strata of society, is not always heroic and is sometimes downright painful. But such history, reconstructed from what John Fanning Watson called "the dust of perished matter," can prepare us to think intelligently about change in our own society. Learning about problems faced and choices made in the past nurtures the ability to inquire into the roots of contemporary issues and problems. As well, it encourages an appreciation for the complexity and ambiguity of choices and unresolved issues that every society has faced; it promotes a wariness about quick and facile solutions; it instills an understanding of the certainty of uncertainty; it teaches the the non-inevitability of outcomes. As Paul Gagnon has written, history, if presented with all its complexities and paradoxes, asks people

to accept costs and compromises, to take on responsibilities as eagerly as they claim rights, to honor the interests of others while pursuing their own, to respect the needs of future generations, to speak the truth and do the right thing when falsehood and the wrong thing would be more profitable, and generally to restrain their appetites and expectations—all this while working to inform themselves on the multiple problems and choices their elected servants confront.33

Such is the purpose of our "vision and revision" of the past.

University of California, Los Angeles

GARY B. NASH

33 Paul Gagnon, "Why Study History?" *Atlantic Monthly* 262 (November 1988), 44.