The Authority of History:  
The Changing Public Face of the  
Historical Society of Pennsylvania

HIGH ABOVE THE CENTRAL HALL of the second floor of the National Museum of American History (NMAH) in Washington, D.C., hangs the Star Spangled Banner—the flag that was "still there" at Ft. McHenry on the morning of September 14, 1814, and having survived bombardment by British ships, inspired Francis Scott Key to compose the song that would later become the American national anthem. Through the years, the banner has deteriorated, and to protect it from further ravages—of light, air, and, especially, cotton dust fibers from museum visitors' blue jeans—through most of the day it is kept behind a decorated, opaque scrim. Every hour, on the half hour, the entryway to the museum is stirred by the sound of a drum roll, a tape plays an 1860s arrangement of the national anthem, and the scrim slowly lowers to reveal the flag. Visitors hear the voice of NMAH director Roger Kennedy, who identifies the flag they are viewing and gives a capsule account of the efforts involved in its preservation. Visitors learn that needle-workers have stitched it to a backing of Irish linen; conservationists have analyzed the effects of its exposure; and the museum has determined to reveal it to view for only a short period every day. Indeed, within a few minutes, the scrim rises again to conceal and protect the flag, and visitors hear the Star Spangled Banner played once more, this time in an arrangement popular in the 1850s.

As this account suggests, the National Museum not only treats this artifact as a treasure—protecting and preserving it as much as possible—but also presents the flag as a treasure. The dramatic unveiling, the account of responsible if not heroic efforts at conservation, the stirring music—all celebrate the flag's special significance, its meaning for our nation. Notably, at no point does the museum make an effort to spell out just what that significance or meaning might be. NMAH never makes a case for the flag's importance. In its way, this decided silence makes a stronger claim than actually speaking to the matter might provide. The question of why the fanfare and the measures of
Barbara Clark Smith

conservation have been dedicated to this flag is not to be considered; indeed, such questions would interfere with the primary message of the display, which is that the Star Spangled Banner represents a national icon, a shrine—something, in other words, besides a simple historical artifact.

No doubt there are hundreds of ways of exhibiting an artifact like the Star Spangled Banner. Without losing the drama or changing the format in any substantial way, at least two other modes or principles of presentation readily come to mind. First, the museum could present the flag as a historical object connected with a particular past event—in this case the War of 1812—or else an object located in the context of specific historical developments—say, the history of flags, or the history of patriotic, national, and military songs. The voice on tape could talk not about how the museum has saved and cared for this flag but about how the banner fits into a line of historical development and change. This would be a way of relocating the flag in its social and historical context, using the visual interest of the flag and the aural interest of the national anthem to draw visitors' attention to some historical moment or development that curators and historians think is important.

A second and related alternative would be to present the flag as a historical symbol. The museum could direct its visitors' attention not to the Star Spangled Banner in particular, but to the American flag in general. NMAH could focus on the fact that the flag has held vastly different meanings for different people at different times. Even if the museum confined itself to what the banner has meant to people within this nation, it could recount a broad array of associations the flag has held, reactions it has provoked, and values it has embodied. At different moments in history, after all, Americans have variously revered that flag, rebelled against it, recognized it as a symbol of invading forces, died for it, worn it on their blue jeans, and, yes, burned it. Planted at Yorktown, at Gettysburg, on San Juan Hill, or on the moon, the American flag has conveyed several and

1 Labels on text stands near the flag do talk about the War of 1812 as well as giving information about the conservation efforts involved in caring for the flag. Similarly, the audio program does identify the flag as from Fort McHenry and the War of 1812. However, the emphasis is clearly on the flag as icon rather than historical information about the war.
even contradictory meanings. The flag has been—as it continues to be—contested terrain.

One possible way of underscoring this point would be to present two versions of the national anthem that are distinguishable in more than minor ways. If visitors hear an 1860s version of the anthem when the flag is revealed, for example, they could listen to a different version—say, the Jimi Hendrix version—when the flag is covered over again. The presentation would thus compare two significantly different renderings of our national song, one from the Civil War, the second from another period of warfare and extraordinary division within American society. By so doing, NMAH might open up for its visitors the question of the significance of the artifact before them, instead of speaking as if the matter is closed, the meaning settled and unmistakable.¹

The latter alternative for presenting the Star Spangled Banner has the potential to raise at least two different kinds of questions for museum visitors: historical questions about the flag (changes and continuities in American perceptions, values, and policies) and historical questions about the museum’s presentation of the flag. The use of Jimi Hendrix might take most museum visitors aback; it might pose (or expose) the museum’s presentation itself as a historical event. Visitors would know that the exhibition in front of them was not a neutral and timeless statement of neutral and timeless historical facts. They might begin asking questions—not the least of which might be: Why did the museum do it that way? In other words, this approach would alter the relationship of museum to public and public to museum. Today, by presenting the Star Spangled Banner as an icon, the museum invites visitors to be worshipful rather than inquiring, impressed rather than thoughtful—impressed, moreover, with both the banner and the museum that cares for it. The presentation enhances NMAH’s image as conservator of the nation’s heritage; that image might be shaken if questions about the museum’s judgment were raised.

¹ The meaning of the American flag as a symbol to Americans seems a particularly potent issue to address in view of recent events. Within the past six months, an outpouring of anger has greeted a Supreme Court decision that protects flag burning as an act of free speech, and the President of the United States has urged changing the Constitution to place the flag beyond the First Amendment.
This celebratory impulse is not the only one to inform the work done and the exhibition techniques used at the National Museum. A good many hours of research and design effort have gone into producing thoughtful, careful, historical exhibitions that proceed from quite different assumptions about the relationship between institution and public. In numerous ways throughout the museum, NMAH encourages visitors not to worship but to think. For all that, however, the case of the Star Spangled Banner provides a valuable example of the contradictory impulses that remain in an institution dedicated to "the increase and diffusion of knowledge." They are contradictions, moreover, easily identified in a host of such institutions across the country.

This article considers the contradictory ways in which some historical institutions—including museums and historical societies—have understood the nature of historical knowledge. How have such institutions constructed their relationship to their publics? How have they established themselves as authorities about the past? Correspondingly, how have they cast their particular collections of manuscripts or artifacts as valuable evidence about history or parts of "our heritage?" This article approaches these questions by focusing on several aspects of the development of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, whose new historical exhibition, "Finding Philadelphia's Past: Visions and Revisions," has inspired this issue of the Magazine. Here I hope to contribute to a growing body of literature that examines historical repositories and museums in historical perspective.3

* * * * *

In 1824 seven young men gathered together to found the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP). They intended "to elucidate the natural, civil, and literary history" of the state, and "to collect, to preserve, and to make accessible reasonably suitable materials from which histories can be written, if undertaken in search of truth."4


The nature of the institution they created appears the more clearly if we contrast it briefly to another significant historical enterprise in the Philadelphia of their day. Charles Willson Peale's museum, founded thirty years before, in 1794, had led the way for history museums. True, Peale's museum was not primarily historical. His collections included mastodon bones and stuffed birds, a wax figure of Meriwether Lewis, a sawed-off trigger finger, and numerous other curiosities as well as portraits of Revolutionary heroes that represented the national past. It was, as Joseph Ellis has put it, "part science and part circus." Yet to Peale this conglomeration of objects was not necessarily disorderly or unrelated. He held an abiding faith in an Enlightenment ideal in which the arts, sciences, and history were deeply interconnected; he believed in the unity of natural and social laws that governed the order of the universe and human experience within it. It was to illuminate these laws, to educate the public in the natural order, that Peale acquired and arranged his artifacts—fish here, birds there, portraits of Revolutionary heroes on top. In his museum, Peale believed, members of the public, liberated by the American Revolution from the deadening superstitions of the past, might imbibe the principles of Linnaean order. To Peale, history was an integral part of that overall order, albeit in a rather implicit and unexamined way.

As Gary Kulik has noted, Peale's vision was an exemplary one, combining a dedication to popular education with concern for "rational entertainment" of the visitor. Yet a balance between these two goals proved difficult to maintain. Dependent on visitors' entrance fees, Peale countered the waning of public interest in his displays by introducing novelties and unusual attractions. Peale's sons and, later, stockholders in the museum pressed further in this direction. Kulik describes the results: "Tattooed human heads, 'anatomical preparations,' freaks of nature which Peale had collected but not displayed

---

came out of storage." Over time, the museum resorted to more curiosities, less science or history; more entertainment, less education. Following Peale's death, his collections eventually came into the hands of P.T. Barnum. It was a moment that marked the bifurcation of the museum movement. After Peale, people abandoned the effort to combine serious historical education and public entertainment. Historical institutions broke down into two categories: cheap dime museums that entertained through the hocus pocus being perfected by Barnum and stuffy historical societies that hewed to historical fact but generally failed to entertain at all.

No doubt the founders of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania were familiar with Peale's declining museum, but it must have seemed a largely irrelevant example to them. From the outset, their institution was meant to be something else entirely. They intended their society to focus exclusively on history rather than embracing the sciences and arts. They imagined a different audience and a different purpose. Theirs was not to teach history but rather to lay up materials from which history could later be written by qualified men of letters. "Our first duty," said Society president Peter Du Ponceau in 1837, "is to collect and preserve materials for future history, and to elucidate historical facts, which have become obscure by the operation of time."

The exhibition of portraits and other artifacts played a secondary part in this vision, and Peale's broad public played very little part at all.

True, to interest the many, there would be a "cabinet of curiosities" displaying medals, coins, other articles associated with great men or events, Indian idols, ornaments, arms, or utensils. The fledgling HSP happily received a variety of artifacts from donors: a silver medal of William Penn, a shaving basin and ewer said to have been used by Penn, a portrait of the young Penn in armor, Penn's hair in a ring, engravings of various subjects, and portraits of Indians. Yet the founders were equally or more interested in providing a forum where they and other enthusiasts of history might meet and discuss the past. And they were unquestionably more interested in developing their library of manuscripts and printed works than in enhancing their

---

7 Kulik, "Designing the Past," 5.
8 Carson, History of the Historical Society, 1:5.
9 Ibid., 1:106, 122.
William Penn's shaving dish, water tank, razor, and compass. The shaving dish and water tank were gifts made to the Society in 1827. The stirrup horn cup was examined in 1963 and is now believed to have been made after Penn's day. It was not included in the exhibition, "Finding Philadelphia's Past."

*Lapowinsa*, oil painting on canvas by Gustavus Hesselius, 1732. John Penn commissioned this and a portrait of Tishcohan, another Lenape chief, before the Walking Purchase Treaty of 1737.
“cabinet of curiosities.” Despite the institution’s interesting artifact collections, HSP was to be a “society” and not a museum.

The founders of HSP differed in age, class, and background from Peale. Born in 1741, Peale had been apprenticed to a saddler, then spent years falling into debt, eking out a living as an itinerant painter. In the years prior to the Revolution he found acclaim—but not financial security—as a portraitist. In the political conflicts of the 1760s and 1770s he fervently took the patriot side; when war broke out, he enlisted in the militia, was elected an officer, and became a figure of note in the radical politics of Philadelphia. Behind this activism lay a deep commitment to republican ideology, an artisanal faith in ordinary citizens’ ability to govern themselves, and a dedication to public education. When he opened his museum in the 1790s, Peale hoped it would help to mold a virtuous, republican citizenry.10

By contrast, the founders of HSP represented a different generation. Born between 1786 and 1800, they ranged in age from twenty-four to thirty-eight at the time they launched the institution. Their families were sufficiently well-established to secure them positions in medicine, mercantile business, or the law, and a number among them enjoyed sufficient leisure and security to put their energies into literary pursuits or the city’s charitable organizations rather than into money-making.11 They were not, as a whole, gripped by the sort of republican vision that had inspired Peale. Their concern lay less with educating artisans or a broad public than with their own knowledge, activities, and, indeed, very nature as a class. Where Peale saw himself as forging a revolutionary and post-revolutionary culture, the founders of HSP located themselves as men of letters, knowledge, and refinement in an emerging middle-class culture. What mobilized them was not Peale’s sense of continuity with the nation’s Revolutionary past but rather a fear of discontinuity, a sense of distance from that history, which they hoped to remedy by their efforts in the HSP. By the 1820s, after all, the remaining members of the Revolutionary generation were elderly and few. These young men’s interest in history surely grew in part out of a desire to establish a tie with a past that

11 Carson, History of the Historical Society, 1:60-78.
seemed to be slipping away. In the first instance, at least, the founders of HSP seem to have worried about their own access to that past.

Indeed, it seems possible that the material security they enjoyed, along with a sense of having been born too late for the great deeds and sacrifices of the Revolutionary era, may have led to anxieties about their relationship to earlier, heroic eras. The Historical Society, said one, acted out of the belief “that there is much to interest and something to instruct in the transactions of those days, when an honest, virtuous, and pious people, relinquishing their early possessions and enjoyments, laid in a wild and uncultivated country, the foundations of a State, now currently great, successful, and happy.”

However great, successful, and happy Pennsylvania might have been in the 1820s, some citizens apparently sensed that the past century of growth had not been entirely for the better.

The Society’s focus on manuscripts and artifacts associated with prominent early Pennsylvanians entailed an alliance with a particular class in 1820s society. When, nine years earlier, the American Philosophical Society had appealed to the public for documents of historical value, it had met with meager response. The HSP pursued manuscript collections by turning in two directions: first, to government bodies that held official records from the colonial and Revolutionary eras, and second, to descendents of the illustrious, who might have inherited documents or mementos of interest to the Society.

The institution’s emphasis on manuscript collections and its view of history tied it to the class that had the relevant documents and mementos, the class of people whose forebears had owned or produced the stuff and then passed it on.

It would be a mistake to conclude that the Society was entirely exclusive. Compared to other similar societies—there were six already established in 1824—the Pennsylvania body defined its boundaries rather generously, setting up three tiers of membership, one for men who lived within ten miles of Philadelphia, one for men living

---

12 Ibid., 1:58. This view of European settlement persisted despite the HSP’s early interest in artifacts and manuscripts associated with regional Native American cultures. Among the first papers acquired by the Society was Rev. John Heckewelder’s manuscript grammar of the Lenni Lenape language: ibid., 1:41.

13 Ibid., 1:38.
Early presidents of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania—all men of the "patrician" class. From a plate in the *PMHB* 34 (1910).
elsewhere in the state, and one for men who lived outside Pennsylvania. They even permitted women to join as "honorary" members. First president William Rawles expressed the unusual opinion that the membership should be "unlimited." Nonetheless early Society members excluded anyone who was not a native Pennsylvanian, unless he or she had resided in the state for a decade. In practice, moreover, the membership did not boom. The HSP remained a far different project from Peale's. It was more closely akin to other high cultural and educational institutions (such as the University of Pennsylvania, the Library Company of Philadelphia, the Academy of Natural Sciences, and the Franklin Institute) being established and supported in the city by other members of the founders' class and, frequently, other members of their own families.

As for the artifacts meant to be viewed by a broad public, one clue to their presentation comes in a description of the "public Hall" of HSP as it stood after the Civil War:

Our Hall is open to the general public. Strangers in our midst are always welcome. The old and middle aged can refresh their patriotism; the young can find expected springs of pleasure and incentives to research. Teachers and pupils, while gazing on our pictured walls or bending over documents, yield readily to the inspiration of the place. Even the cold, the incredulous or the unsympathetic fail to resist its charms. Very few depart without having taken to heart the lessons of hardship, of struggle, of sacrifice, of courage, of achievement, of wisdom, of devotion to principles taught by our sires. The dreaming eyes of the youthful Penn in armor, the sword of John Paul Jones, the authentic letters of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, the features of Washington as preserved by the brush of Stuart, the office desk of Lincoln are the fit companions of those radiant books which reveal to us the America of the past, which teach us the true meaning of America as she is, and fill us with high hopes of what she may become.

---


16 Quoted in ibid., 1:8.
The keynotes struck here were unabashedly messages of patriotism and inspiration. Moreover, although the Society embraced “strangers” among its intended public, it is easy to detect a primary awareness of a more limited audience. It is not merely that the public hall focused solely on the lives of the “sires” of Society members and others of their ilk; all sorts of people, after all, not just descendants, might care about the early settlers’ experiences and accomplishments. Surely Society members hoped that many public visitors would attend the hall and find inspiration there. Yet it seems unlikely that, say, an Irish immigrant who wandered through the public hall would receive any substantial enlightenment, either from these objects’ labeling or presentation, about Pennsylvania history. Without prior knowledge of that history, how was a visitor to be awed or uplifted, to learn lessons of sacrifice and struggle? It is hard to see, for example, how visitors would be inspired by Penn’s “dreaming” gaze unless they had already heard accounts of his faith and courage. Those unfamiliar with the saga of Pennsylvania’s founding, in other words, might find themselves at sea in this sort of public hall. The artifacts on display were apparently better at preaching to the converted than at educating in the more common sense of that term.

In fact, as the description of the “public Hall” suggests, objects on exhibition simply made vivid and inspirational a narrative of history learned elsewhere—especially from books. With the artifacts left to “speak for themselves” (an exhibit approach preferred by many curators today), visitors could only place them in a context already familiar to them—a context historical or ahistorical, accurate or inaccurate. Drawing on visitors’ years of indoctrination into reverence for the historical actors and events with which objects were associated, such public displays might prove affecting indeed. In this context, the value of the artifacts—their authority as pieces of history—depended on a unitary culture in which certain shared ideas about history were already in place. Chairs, medals, and portraits worked as symbols, evoking associations among a limited public that the Society constructed and to which the Society primarily appealed.

Apparently, the public hall was not packed with visitors very often. According to one official history of the institution, HSP languished during the middle years of the nineteenth century, suspending its activities from the Panic of 1837 through the early 1840s, and found
George Washington, oil painting on canvas, cut down from a larger canvas, by Charles Willson Peale, 1772.

George Washington's desk (ca. 1789), which Washington bought in New York and brought to Philadelphia.
little support or interest during the Civil War. Indeed, many historical societies, according to Julian P. Boyd, experienced an initial burst of interest and energy but soon suffered from flagging interest and lagging membership rolls. J. Franklin Jameson has written that, in the early 1880s, “historical societies were few, feeble mostly, and myopic.”

Yet in 1884, HSP happily took possession of new and more respectable quarters at the “Patterson mansion” at 1300 Locust Street in Philadelphia. To one academician, the move augured a new era for the Society, a new face of reputability. “Not many years since an Historical Society was commonly believed to differ little from a dime museum,” he said. “People believed its quarters to be a dingy room in an attic, and its treasures bullets from Bunker Hill and guns from Yorktown, arrow-heads from Tippecanoe, books nobody ever read, and portraits, as like as two peas, of gentlemen in small clothes with red curtains tastefully draped behind them and cannons and flags beyond.”

The new building, some felt, presented an opportunity to command greater respect by distinguishing the Society the more firmly from institutions of popular entertainment.

In the closing decades of the century, a wide range of historical institutions began to reap the benefits—and burdens—of a broadened public concern for the American past. In 1876 the centennial anniversary of independence from Great Britain provided Americans with an occasion to celebrate both their heritage and their future. Crowds flocked to Philadelphia to attend an exposition of American manufactures and machinery, an event that anticipated future commercial, industrial and technological greatness for the nation but which also included significant allusions to the past. One popular feature of the Centennial was a “New England kitchen,” complete with colonial hearth and cooking utensils, and women wearing colonial costume. The close of the Reconstruction era, marked that same year by the withdrawal of federal troops from the former Confederate states, also

17 Ibid., 7:177-83.
Printed silk Centennial memento ribbon, 1876, offers a cornucopia of facts, including America's population growth, the battles of the Revolution, and the dates various states joined the Union.
Centennial chair, 1876. With woven silk portrait of Washington, rifles and patriot soldiers for stiles, among several features, this piece is laden with symbols of the Revolution.
prompted a turn to early American history. "Reunion" demanded historical narratives that downplayed recent antagonisms to stress the origin of the nation and the unity of white society, North and South. Stories of colonial, Revolutionary, and Federal America, neatly skipping over the intervening generations of antagonism, served particularly well as the source of experiences and loyalties that American whites allegedly shared.

As one historian put it in 1958, "another force" promoting late-nineteenth-century public interest in the past was "a heightened, more sophisticated concern for American national growth and world status that took new interest in American beginnings and basic principles."

As an ambitious state reached for greater power at home and abroad, it promoted rituals, traditions, and symbols of the past around which citizens might rally and through which they might develop deeper loyalty to the state. In the creation of modern nationalism, a consciousness of American history (or a carefully controlled version thereof) and the promotion of icons could be a valuable resource.

The newly compelling nature of such icons appears in Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice James T. Mitchell's account of changing public feeling toward the Liberty Bell, written in 1891. Back in 1816, Mitchell noted, when the state capitol moved from Philadelphia to Harrisburg, the Pennsylvania legislature had placed Independence Hall up for sale. There was no public outrage about the endangerment of that historic site nor even a particular mention of the bell stored inside. It was "a sad illustration of the want of reverence for historical and patriotic associations in our people at that time," thought Mitchell. Happily, things had changed.

Notably does it illustrate the growth of national and patriotic sentiment, that, while I am writing this review of the Act of 1816, the Liberty Bell, which was not thought worth mention in it, but left to be sold as old lumber within the walls and rafters of Independence Hall, is making a triumphant journey, in a special train with a special guard,


to the gathering of nations at Chicago, and at every stopping place by
day or by night meeting a spontaneous outpouring of love and pride
and veneration not accorded to any ruler in the world.\(^{23}\)

Quite simply, veneration for symbols of colonial and Revolutionary
America seemed to fill needs that existed in the 1880s and 1890s
but had not existed in the 1810s.

In turn, those needs arose at least in some measure from active
promotion by the state and by the nation’s ruling classes. Beginning
in the 1880s, for example, public school systems directly promoted
“worship of the American flag,” a practice that undoubtedly con-
tributed to new attitudes toward the Liberty Bell too.\(^{24}\) In both cases,
notably, the meaning of the central object and the rituals associated
with it remained vague in the extreme. Participants in viewing the
bell, for example, might feel comforted at sharing loyalties and tra-
ditions with their fellows; yet it was a sense of commonality that
could be enjoyed and, indeed, put to use by the state, without a
substantive notion of what such commonality might be about. As
Mitchell himself pointed out, moreover, the American tradition of
respect for the bell was of recent origin.

Just which Americans responded to the Liberty Bell, or which
shared the new interest in early American life and culture, is not
entirely clear. Yet there is little doubt that some aspects of the so-
called Colonial Revival expressed specific class and ethnic concerns.\(^{25}\)
That revival grew, in part, out of increasing worries about the rapid
transformations affecting American life. By the late nineteenth cen-
tury, while some Americans celebrated the nation’s economic growth,
industrial power, and international prestige, others responded to these
developments with unease. A widening gap between rich and poor;
the growing visibility of urban slums, labor unrest, and a host of


\(^{24}\) The phrase is Eric Hobsbawm’s: Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (New

\(^{25}\) On the “Colonial Revival,” see Barbara Clark Smith, *After the Revolution: The Smith-
sonian History of Everyday Life in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1985), x-xiii; Kulik,
American Decorative Arts,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 17 (1982), 47-48; Elizabeth Stillinger, *The
Antiquers* (New York, 1980).
related social ills cast doubt on the easy assumption that technological change and economic growth necessarily spelled "progress."

Prompted by these concerns, some citizens turned to movements of social reform or political radicalism. Others, including many members of the nation's old Anglo-Saxon elite, responded in a more conservative vein. They too expressed concern about social changes brought by industrial growth, worrying about the loss of traditional social hierarchies, the influx of new immigrants from central and southern Europe, and the spectre of labor radicalism. In this context, a romantic preoccupation with colonial America might function as antidote for and critique of the modern era. It was possible to see in early America virtues now threatened or actually wiped away, to admire and envy the "honest, virtuous, and pious people" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to imagine colonial society as free of ethnic, racial, or class conflict, and to celebrate the virtues of handcraftsmanship over those of mass production. The pre-industrial craftsman who slowly worked his way from apprentice to journeyman to master, the colonial goodwife who meekly tended to her domestic affairs, the docile African-American slave—all were images that (however accurate or inaccurate) seemed to some to compare favorably with the restless, deskilled workers, assertive "new women," and aspiring freedpeople of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This ethno- and class-based enthusiasm for the nation's pre-industrial past deeply marked many historical museums and societies. It supported a determinedly romantic view of the American past, a vision of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century history that necessarily left out of its purview disquieting realities of racial and class conflict that had actually marked that era. The impetus was simply to celebrate the past rather than think about it. For many private historical societies, this view required little change of agenda but rather promoted continued celebration of the membership's own ancestors.

Correspondingly, the Colonial Revival promoted a particular concern—at times a mania—for genealogical study. Race, notes Eric Hobsbawm, was an idea that "penetrated the ideology" of the decades before World War I most profoundly. Nations found use for the idea in explaining their drive for empire, but within metropolitan societies themselves people also turned to racial categorization of the population for a significant explanatory role. "Humanity was increasingly divided
into the energetic and talented stock of the middle classes and the supine masses whose genetic deficiencies doomed them to inferiority,” according to Hobsbawm. “Biology was called upon to explain inequality, particularly by those who felt themselves destined for superiority,” 26 In the United States, the presence of African Americans, now free and technically citizens, combined with the new immigration to make questions of who was and was not “American” seem crucial. Beginning in the 1880s, societies vouching for the pedigree of their members—the Sons of the American Revolution, the Colonial Dames, and others—came on the scene. Here were new “societies,” clubs dedicated to setting their members aside (or rather, above) by identifying themselves with the founders of the American nation and their own point of view with a “true” and “original” American culture.

Like many other institutions run by “gentleman scholars,” HSP made genealogy a central project. 27 Thus, the Society’s “historiographer” during the 1910s, Josiah Granville Leach, was said to have believed in the importance of “patriotic hereditary societies” on the basis that “like produces like, and the descendant of a race-horse once started would run true to form.” 28 Similarly, Hampton L. Carson’s own two-volume History of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, written in the early 1920s, ponderously detailed one after another of the institution’s presidential administrations, taking care in each chapter to begin with a careful genealogy of the president in question. Recounting these men’s ancestry, Carson felt, emphasized their blood relationships to the founders of the republic and provided a way “to knit Colonial and Revolutionary days to those of the last one hundred years. In this way the unity of our history as a colony, a state, a municipality, and as a nation becomes apparent.” 29 Unity, in other words, was to be imposed on Pennsylvania history; discontinuities would be written out of the historical record. The “true” history of the state and nation remained that of the increasingly limited group of American whites whose ancestors had arrived over a century before.

26 Hobsbawm, Age of Empire, 32.
28 Ibid., 2:319.
29 Ibid., 1:xv.
African Americans, excluded from the polity, were notably excluded from history, as were latecoming immigrants.\footnote{Ibid., 1:13-14, lists the “racial strains” that had combined to build the Commonwealth. African Americans are notably absent from the list.}

Finally, the Colonial Revival brought new attitudes toward objects from the pre-industrial period, attitudes that have affected museums’ and historical societies’ perceptions of their own collections to the present day. Hand-in-hand with the romanticization of pre-industrial social relations came a new aesthetic appreciation for the products of pre-industrial production. Around the turn of the century, early American decorative arts—furniture, textiles, metalwares, glass, and ceramics—came into vogue. Wealthy collectors began accumulating early American pieces, and museums quickly followed. In 1924 the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened an “American Wing” that displayed early American furnishings in the context of “period rooms,” using architectural elements from elite houses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as backdrops for beautiful artifacts.\footnote{Kaplan, “R.T.H. Halsey,” 43-53; Kulik, “Designing the Past,” 13-17.}

Following the lead of the Met, other museums adopted decorative arts categories and values as ways of celebrating the skills of early American craftsmen and the taste of the early American elite. In a great many historical institutions, the basis of the authority of artifact collections shifted. Immediate association with famous people of the past still counted (the HSP happily accessioned William Penn’s sash in 1919, for example)\footnote{Carson, History of the Historical Society, 1:133.}; now, however, many artifacts took on value as art—that is, by virtue of their supposed beauty and purity of form. Accordingly, educating the public meant presenting them with the decorative arts categories significant to collectors and dealers (“Queen Anne style,” for example) and, not incidentally, an artifact’s “provenance,” including the names of those individuals or families who had produced, owned, and donated the object in question. The value of such artifacts, then, became bound up with judgments of artistic rather than historical meaning, with prices generated in a wider antiques market, and with a glorification of early American craftsmanship and the taste of the early American elite. Historical institutions that adopted these ideas thus retained long-standing class alliances, equat-
ing professional knowledge with connoisseurship rather than scholarly achievement, valuing connections with well-to-do donors, and casting American history as a succession of decorative styles.

This view of the national past received sustained challenge in the late 1930s. In part the challenge came from public historical societies which, influenced by public funding, gave popular education a more preeminent role. Yet the private HSP strongly felt the need to change as well. That society appointed a seven-member Committee on Objectives to reassess the institution's accomplishments and goals. The committee's report, presented in June 1939, represented a damning indictment of the directions in which historical societies had developed. In the words of Julian Boyd, all too many such societies were guided by "narrowed interests, preoccupation with antiquarian subjects, jealous competition with each other, unsystematic and even unenlightened acquisitiveness, and a reluctance to accept improved methods or new interpretations." It was a critique that proceeded in part from the world of academic scholarship, across the gulf that had come to insulate such societies from the academic historians' priorities and points of view. Beginning in the 1880s, historians in American universities had taken steps to organize themselves and to establish set fields of study, standards, and credentials for entry into the profession. At the outset, their new forum, the American Historical Association (AHA) included many "gentleman scholars" as well as academic men, and officers of state and local historical societies were prominent in the organization. Moreover, affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution tied the new organization to the world of museums and artifacts, not merely that of colleges and universities. But within a brief span of years, the AHA had chosen to focus primarily on the needs and interests of academic historians. Institutions such as the


Historical Society of Pennsylvania remained largely the preserve of "gentlemen scholars," untrained in the "scientific" history popular on German and, now, American campuses. Although many societies continued to take seriously their role of serving scholars by creating and preserving manuscript collections, they also were isolated from the AHA's brand of professionalism. Their continued alliance with those classes most interested in genealogy and high-style decorative arts set them apart from much of the scholarly world.

HSP's reformulation of its mission in the late 1930s was responsive to scholarly critiques. Historical societies, said the report, must refocus on larger themes of history rather than the details of personal pedigree of moment to a relatively few members of American society. Henceforth, said Boyd, the Society would develop "a broad and intelligent interest in the fundamental unit in society, the family, and not a mere concern for the compilation of genealogical tables." Correspondingly, too, the Society's publication, the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, should broaden its focus "to be a repository for scholarly historical articles," and not to choose articles "with reference to local or family pride."\(^{36}\) That that transition was a real one is reflected in the fact that the Library of Congress stores only part of the *PMHB* in their "Local History and Genealogy" room. Volumes published since the late 1930s are assumed to contain more substantive historical articles that are not primarily of interest to genealogists.

Yet if the committee's "Declaration of Faith" charted a course that would make the Society more academic, it also expressed keen awareness of broader social influences. Rocked by the Great Depression and buoyed by a new awareness of the American "people," HSP now would broaden its purview. In the 1939 declaration is the promise of seeing objects in the collections as historical—that is, as having a value other than the aesthetic and celebratory, but as revealing truths about the past. "This is, indeed, a formal abandonment of the warehouse theory of custodianship; it substitutes therefore a trusteeship, to be justified only in terms of increased accessibility and increased usefulness."\(^{37}\) As the report itself put it, the obligation of educating


a broad public about the past might "be met with dignity and without sacrificing intellectual standards, . . . [P]opularization of knowledge need not necessarily be vulgarization."\(^38\)

Here was an effort to construct a different relationship to a different, broader public, a relationship in which HSP would take responsibility for education, drawing people in and doing what we now call "outreach"—"by popular types of lectures, by radio dramatization, and possibly by popular historical publications."\(^39\) The institution adopted a version of history that fitted with these larger goals. Among the "compelling assumptions" shaping the committee report was "a belief in the values and dignity of the incomparable story of America, a delight in its various voices from all lands blending into a common voice of hope and promise." The Society's new direction, said Boyd,

means a deep concern for the life of the people as well as a desire to record the actions of their leaders. It means that here in Pennsylvania—from the beginning the most cosmopolitan and democratic of all the States—history concerns itself with the Finns and Swedes, the Dutch and English, the Scots-Irish and Germans, the Negroes and Slavs, without regard to their status, their beliefs, their color, or their accent.\(^40\)

Boyd enunciated a vision of Pennsylvania history that, while still celebratory, was substantially more inclusive than earlier views.\(^41\) The vision suggested a story of diversity as much as unity, and it promised to construct that story by attending to the experiences and aspirations of ordinary as well as well-to-do Americans. Correspondingly, the audience for that history was to be a diversified and expansive one. The study of the past, after all, was "not merely a department of literature necessary for the cultured man: it is an essential way of approach to the problems of man in his relation to society."\(^42\) History was therefore needed by all.

In the years that followed this reassessment, a dual commitment to standards of the historical academy and to producing a broader sense of history for a broader public proved far from fully consonant.

---

\(^{38}\) "Declaration of Faith," in ibid., 162.

\(^{39}\) Ibid.


\(^{41}\) See note 30.

Shortly the academy itself began to wield a narrowing influence. By the 1950s, few scholars were devising inclusive accounts of the past. With some exceptions, historians in universities and colleges exhibited a distinct lack of interest in Americans of different status, beliefs, color, or accent. Much academic work suppressed those differences, along with the social, political, and cultural conflict generated thereby. On American campuses, the anti-Communism and anti-intellectualism of the age had stultifying effects, narrowing the focus of historical work, and museums and historical societies felt the narrowing too.43

In practice, academic currents have been less important than wider social movements in bringing the most recent round of changes to historical institutions. In the 1960s and 1970s, pressed by movements for black, women’s, and Native American rights, and by a new awareness of poverty, academicians rethought their relationship to the study of the American past. They began to open up new subjects for study. In part this has involved a renewed concern for studying American society as a whole, for locating social groups, whether at the top, bottom, or middle of the heap, in the context of their period's overall social structure.44 New social historians also have cared about the broader public’s understanding of history; and the academy’s decision to supplement high politics with studies of the everyday life of ordinary people has opened up the possibility of new links with museums and other repositories with artifactual collections ranging from stoves to quilts to engravings. Museum professionals—growing numbers of them trained in social history—are re-viewing the collections in their storerooms, considering not their stylistic names and aesthetic values but their usefulness for learning about a sweeping American past. Some curators are contesting technological historians’ claim that the wood, plastic, fabric, or metal of which artifacts are composed are somehow more real or more basic to those objects than the social and cultural meanings attached to them by their makers and users.

43 See Smith, After the Revolution, xiv-xvii, for one example.
It is in this context that “Finding Philadelphia’s Past” takes a place in the history of historical institutions’ relationships with their publics. This new installation draws extensively on the findings and approaches of social history. It represents an effort to tell an inclusive story, embracing the many layers of early Pennsylvania society and locating various social, ethnic, and cultural groups carefully in relationship to one another. It represents, too, an effort to escape from the largely celebratory approaches of the past. Mere patriotism, it now seems clear, works as a significant obstacle to good history.

This has meant, first, a rethinking of the objects in the collections. A chest of drawers once considered illustrative of the William and Mary style here becomes evidence of the contradictory nature of William Penn’s vision for the society he hoped to create in Philadelphia. Like other members of the Society of Friends, Penn eschewed many aspects of social hierarchy. His vision for Pennsylvania was deeply informed by the Quakers’ commitment to a rough social egalitarianism. Yet once in his new domain, Penn, son of an aristocrat, built a mansion, staffed it with servants, and furnished it with high-style goods. Rather than presenting such goods in order to celebrate Penn’s aesthetic taste, “Finding Philadelphia’s Past” questions what that taste might have signified in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The chest of drawers helps to illuminate the class assumptions that deeply shaped the lives of all settlers in early Pennsylvania. In its efforts to move away from a purely decorative arts approach to objects in the collections, “Finding Philadelphia’s Past” pursues the potential, spelled out in the 1939 declaration, of seeing objects in the collections as historical—that is, as having a value other than the artistic, but as revealing truths about the past.

Equally important, the creators of the new exhibition have adopted as a key intention that of drawing people’s attention to the institution, its nature, its biases and lapses in collecting. This concern takes the form of label text that directly discusses such matters. Thus, for example, two pewter items—a shaving basin and ewer—once collected for their association with William Penn will now be on exhibit to illustrate the institution’s historical proclivity for objects associated with famous men. If or when Penn ever used these basins, visitors

---

45 The acquisition of these objects is noted in Carson, History of the Historical Society, 1:122.
learn, remains unknown to researchers. At the same time it has been vital to grapple with the history of objects that HSP’s collections do not contain. To deal with absences in their collections, many institutions have begun to borrow from other repositories and collect anew. Yet for many areas even these approaches will not yield enough. Instead, innovative curators and designers have created new techniques for bringing “absences” to visitors’ minds. In “Finding Philadelphia’s Past” the HSP has decided to use an image of Ben Franklin’s bifocals, placed in juxtaposition to various artifacts and labels, to remind museum-goers of the need to look at the exhibition with dual vision—with one eye to what is there, one to what is missing; one eye to earlier interpretations of an object, one to more recent interpretations; one eye to what an artifact meant to its prosperous owner, one to what it meant to less privileged members of the society.

Taken together, these changes begin to open up for the museum-going public questions of the institution’s own authority and its own past. In “Finding Philadelphia’s Past,” in other words, curators and
Pennsylvania German painted chest, maker unknown (1785). While British colonists abandoned chests in favor of dressers for storing clothes and linen, many German colonists continued making and using the older form. The Society purchased the chest in 1912 when interest in such colonial objects ran high.

Historians have taken steps to add Jimi Hendrix to the Star Spangled Banner—that is, to raise questions about their own collections, their own history, their own modes of presentation. Here is an exhibition designed to have a subtext, a second line of thought, in which visitors consider not merely the history of the City of Brotherly Love but the history of the institution presenting it, the framework of that institution, the limitations of its views. There is much that is familiar here to scholars. In the classroom, professors take pains to teach students how to read history books, both to learn information about past events and to consider the adequacy of an author's interpretations and evidence. Education in the academy has long encompassed the ability to understand the nature of books as "authorities," the ability to ask: what is left out? and, indeed, why? Good teachers of history, surely, have always taken pains to train students to read texts with an eye for contradictions and silences. In the museum world historical presentations of that sophistication are just beginning to appear. The project is to encourage an informed museum-going public that will ask why tour guides do not mention slaves at Mt. Vernon, or consider a
historic house and wonder where its owner got the money for it, what it reflects besides its owner's taste, and what of the lives of the servants who must have staffed it. The project is to form and inform a public that wonders why the Star Spangled Banner is there, why it should be presented in such a way, and what their own relationship to that artifact might be. The project involves constructing a critical museum-going public that understands historical exhibitions themselves as interpretations, and historical repositories as, necessarily, contested terrain.

Smithsonian Institution

BARBARA CLARK SMITH