

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Circles and Lines: The Shape of Life in Early America.* By JOHN DEMOS.  
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004. xi, 98p. Illustrations,  
notes, index. \$19.95.)

This slim volume consists of the text of the 2002 Massey Lectures at Harvard University. John Demos seems to have used the lectures as an occasion to try out some ideas from the initial stages of a promising new project. The metaphors that Demos investigates, “circles” and “lines,” have to do with perceptions of time. Demos traces a shift in American thinking about time—by which he means everything from the time of day to the time of one’s life—from the circular pattern that dominated in the seventeenth century to the linear pattern of the nineteenth.

Circularity was, according to Demos, the traditional attitude toward time among the settlers of seventeenth-century North America. As a result of the way that most people’s lives were deeply embedded in agricultural practices that kept them closely tied to nature, the “life cycle” included little sense of progress, little sense that one would become something different over the course of life or that it was important to overcome one’s origin. This all changed, Demos tells us, over the course of the eighteenth century, and by the early decades of the nineteenth people had begun to think of life in terms of lines: progress, movement ahead, having a “career.” In addition to nature, religion, economics, and technology all play roles in this story as Demos tells it.

Throughout the book, Demos pays welcome attention to how metaphors derived from such diverse sources as the lunar cycle and the idea of motion structure the ways in which people understand the world. Central to his analysis of the language of time is the changing meaning of the word “revolution” in the late eighteenth century, from a return or restoration to a transformation and new beginning. The book opens with a quotation from Emerson’s essay “Circles,” and Demos proceeds to follow Emerson in gracefully elucidating the central role that this and other words play in the way individuals organize experience.

Due to the lecture format, Demos can only sketch these ideas in general terms. The majority of the examples come from New England, and the extent to which Demos’s argument pertains to other regions of the country is not clear. In his discussion of the seventeenth century especially, Demos makes Puritans exemplary figures in their thinking about time without ever really acknowledging that this is what he is doing. The consequences of this focus become apparent when, for instance, Demos argues that a “sharpened sense of self” emerged in autobiographical writings of the nineteenth century that had not existed in the

seventeenth. Since all three of the examples of seventeenth-century autobiographical writings come from New England Puritans, readers might well wonder how Demos would account for the writings of people such as Thomas Morton or John Smith, writings which seem to display both an acute consciousness of selfhood and a more linear attitude toward time. More generally, it is not clear how Demos's concept of circles and lines fits within the national framework he applies. Peter Fritzsche has recently published a rather similar but more international analysis of a transformation from circular to linear conceptions of historical time in which the French Revolution, rather than the American, plays the key role. While there is clearly a connection between time and the emergence of modern national identity, Demos never makes explicit his rationale for focusing exclusively on one national tradition. Of course, such omissions are quite natural given the necessarily prescribed length of a book based on a lecture series. *Circles and Lines* allows us a glimpse of a fine historian embarking upon an exciting new project, creating an inventory of what we do already know and deciding what important questions need to be asked. The book will no doubt leave readers eagerly awaiting more of Demos's work on this fascinating topic.

University of Ottawa

THOMAS M. ALLEN

*The Founding Fathers and the Politics of Character.* By ANDREW S. TREES. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004. xvi, 208p. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95.)

This book examines the efforts of four founding fathers—Jefferson, Hamilton, Adams, and Madison—to shape their young nation while remaining above the fray of politics. To accomplish this tightrope task, these founders endeavored first to create personal characters: personas at times public, at times private, and at times blurring the distinction. Through these personal characters, the founders wished to reimagine the political world, to provide “a character for the nation to match their own” (p. xi). In an adroit blend of history and literary analysis, author Andrew S. Trees distills the essence of each founder's character, identifies a genre of literature most suited to that character, and closely reads an illustrative sample written by the respective founder. This organizing device succeeds marvelously. Trees traces Jefferson's character, premised upon friendship, through a familiar letter in which Jefferson sought to enlist Elbridge Gerry in opposition to the quasi-war with France. He sounds Hamilton's character, fastidious for honor, through a defensive pamphlet in which Hamilton refuted charges of speculation but acknowledged an adulterous affair. He explores Adams's character, consumed with virtue, through the suspicious, skeptical diary entries in which Adams ultimately resolved that government must harness

individuals' base passions for the public good. And he investigates Madison's character, devoted to justice, through the *Federalist* #37, in which Madison attempted to train his audience how to read the Constitution. Throughout his study, Trees scrutinizes each founder's struggle to negotiate the shifting, collapsing divide between the public and private realms. He concludes by analyzing Mason Locke Weems's didactic biography of Washington, which signaled a shift to a more private definition of character and a less personalized mode of politics.

Trees's choice of founders for this study is narrow and traditional. Here we find none of the libeling newspapermen, infighting congressmen, parading mechanics, or protesting farmers that have populated recent studies of the founding period. Nor, for that matter, do women, African Americans, or Native Americans feature prominently in this book (though Trees is very sensitive to gender and race, always carefully delineating the roles his founders assigned such groups in their visions of the national polity). Trees's decision to limit his study in this manner is regrettable because the central dilemma his founders each faced, "how to act in the political sphere without being politicians," was a dilemma unique to their privileged stature as revolutionary icons and preeminent statesmen. Ordinary Americans, by contrast, did not view themselves as "disinterested guardians of the public good" (p. xi). Few, perhaps, felt the need to craft the public characters that Trees's founders did. But it was *their* participation in early national political life—partisan, rancorous, cacophonous, self-promoting—that most profoundly influenced U.S. national character, not the founding fathers' ideals of friendship, honor, virtue, or justice. This critique, however, only points out what Trees already knows: the founding fathers could not ultimately determine the character of the nation they created. They were swimming upstream in an increasingly swift democratic current.

*The Founding Fathers and the Politics of Character* is remarkably good: elegant in its simplicity and utterly convincing in its depictions of the founders. Trees knows these characters extremely well and his book is an excellent primer—and a fun read—for anyone who wishes to know them better.

University of Arizona

BENJAMIN H. IRVIN

*Benjamin Rush: Patriot and Physician.* By ALYN BRODSKY. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004. 404p. Notes, selected bibliography, index. \$35.)

It has become fashionable of late among academics and nonacademics alike to write books on that small group of select men of the revolutionary era known as the founders, helping to establish in the process a trend that has become known as "founders chic." These books include the recent biographies by David McCullough on John Adams, Ron Chernow on Alexander Hamilton, and

Joseph Ellis on George Washington. A second group of writers, eschewing the individual for the collective, have focused on larger subsets of these men. These works include Ellis's *Founding Brothers* (2000), Joanne Freeman's *Affairs of Honor* (2001), and Woody Holton's *Forced Founders* (1999).

One revolutionary figure who is conspicuously absent in this resurgence of interest in the founders is Benjamin Rush, particularly given his influence in a variety of areas of early American life and his involvement in so many of the major events of his day. This omission is especially acute in light of the fact that the last full-length biography of Rush—Carl Binger's *Revolutionary Doctor*—was published in 1966 and that David Freeman Hawke's 1971 work, *Benjamin Rush: Revolutionary Gadfly*, covers only the war years of Rush's life. Granted, Rush has never really achieved the same founders' status in the popular imagination as has Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, or Franklin. However, with this new biography by Alyn Brodsky, whose former books include biographies of Mayor Fiorello La Guardia of New York City and President Grover Cleveland, it seems that Rush is benefiting from this renewed interest in the men of his generation. In fact, Brodsky is well aware of Rush's second-class status, noting that even though Rush "appears so often, and so meaningfully, in the biographies of these titans, he remains by comparison little more than a historical footnote" (p. 5). Consequently, Brodsky's primary goal is to make a case for why Rush deserves a permanent place in the founders' pantheon.

The audience Brodsky clearly hopes to convince of Rush's greatness is the larger American public, as the book is organized and written in a way that will not put off nonacademics. As a result, there is no scholarly introduction, with its emphasis on argument and contribution, review of the scholarly literature, and chapter summaries. Instead, Brodsky's biography includes only a short prologue that is written to draw readers into a world of great men participating in the founding of a new nation. He then moves quickly to the business at hand—detailing the events of Rush's life. Brodsky has organized the biography in a chronological format beginning with an account of Rush's colonial ancestors and ending with his death in 1813, with the narrative structure centering on Rush's major achievements and his relationships with other founders. The biography draws heavily on the earlier works of Binger and Hawke and a 1934 biography by Nathan Goodman and, therefore, offers little that is new for scholars of colonial and early American history. The need, then, remains for works on Rush that examine his life from a more critical perspective and that take into account the large body of scholarship that political, social, and cultural historians have produced since the 1960s.

Seattle University

JACQUELYN C. MILLER

*Utility and Beauty: Robert Wellford and Composition Ornament in America.*

By MARK REINBERGER. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003. 190p. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$65.)

In this well-researched and generously illustrated book, Mark Reinberger explores the rise and fall of composition ornament making in early America through the career of Robert Wellford. Upon immigrating to Philadelphia from London, Wellford managed the longest-running, and perhaps best-known, composition ornament (or compo) manufactory in the United States. From 1797 until 1836, Wellford designed, produced, and supplied compo in the neoclassical style from Pennsylvania to South Carolina. Piecing together the story of his career from business records, advertisements, letters, and the almost 150 identifiable examples of his compo on mantles and other woodwork, Reinberger provides the first systematic study and catalog of Wellford's work. *Utility and Beauty* is a significant contribution to both the fields of architectural and decorative-arts history and illuminates how our understanding of ornament is enriched through an object-oriented connoisseurship paired with a study of the social and commercial contexts.

The first half of the book successfully reconstructs Wellford's craft and business practice and situates him within the context of his American and British competitors, presenting a comparable study to Alison Kelly's *Mrs. Coade's Stone* (1990). The author is further informed by Neil McKendrick's work on Josiah Wedgwood, and he analyzes Wellford's marketing and sales strategies, the technology and application of ornament, and the democratization of consumer goods in an increasingly mass market.

Moving beyond studies that focus on manufacture in specific regions only, Reinberger sketches a national picture of composition ornament and considers how style, consumption patterns, and use differed according to class (middling versus wealthy) and geographic location (urban versus rural, North versus South). Although Reinberger offers fewer examples of compo used in middling households (due to the greater survival of the material culture of elite Americans), he does raise key issues about the influence of class and political ideology on the manufacture and marketing of decorative objects in this period. I wanted to know more about two of Wellford's little discussed consumers: the house carpenter and women. Reinberger privileges the wealthy, male consumer because of the existing evidence, yet his study is incomplete without reference to how other artisans and female consumers shaped design and application.

Among the numerous strengths of *Utility and Beauty* is the extensive catalog of Wellford's extant ornament. Reinberger illustrates more than eighty examples of Wellford's compo, predominantly from mantelpieces, and gives the history of each motif, its symbolic content, composition and size, number and location of known examples, and possible design sources. Most of this information is conve-

niently summarized in three appendices. These illustrations would have been even more helpful if Reinberger had included figure numbers to help the reader match the images to the corresponding text.

From this visual survey emerges a wonderful example of the transmission of neoclassicism along the Atlantic rim. Reinberger skillfully tracks down Wellford's sources from British and American iconography and demonstrates how designs by Josiah Wedgwood or Angelica Kauffmann found their way into the American parlor. Moreover, by analyzing Wellford's compo within its architectural context, the author contributes to the growing body of architectural and material culture studies that consider the symbolic nature of decoration within the home. Reinberger effectively balances his discussion of Wellford the artist with an investigation of how ornament was used within individual homes and the community at large to signify such intangibles as taste, status, and patriotism.

*Utility and Beauty* will appeal to the connoisseur and historian alike, as Reinberger has created a three-dimensional picture of the craftsman-manufacturer in federal America. This book should inspire further study not just on Wellford's ornament but also on the many Philadelphia artisans who contributed to the look, feel, and symbolism of homes in the early republic.

University of Delaware

AMY HUDSON HENDERSON

*Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories.* By JEAN M. HUMEZ. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. xii, 471p. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$45; paper, \$19.95.)

Before I assigned Jean Humez's *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories* to my undergraduates to read, I asked what they knew about Tubman. The answers were not surprising. As an illiterate and disabled former slave, my students explained, Tubman served as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, where she guided a number of slaves to safety by following the North Star, keeping track of what side of the tree the moss grew on, and by seeking shelter with sympathetic northern whites. Tubman remains rather a mystical figure, a woman with otherworldly powers who was guided by forces outside of her control. Unable to write her own story, Tubman has been a subject often, but rarely an agent. In *Harriet Tubman*, Humez has carefully reconstructed her life through oral histories, Tubman biographies dating back to 1865, and several of Tubman's dictated letters. The result is a more complex history of a woman who, while familiar to many, is understood by few.

*Harriet Tubman* is split up into four parts, each of which will appeal to different groups of readers. Part 1 is Humez's brief biography. In part 2, Humez analyzes the contexts in which Tubman authored the various texts about her life

and describes Tubman's relationships with her various biographers. Part 3, entitled "Stories and Sayings," compares versions of the major events in Tubman's life—the head injury, her underground work, and the 1863 Combahee River Raid in which Tubman led a group of U.S. soldiers across enemy lines, for example—authored by various of Tubman's contemporaries. Finally, part 4 is entitled "Documents," but here as in part 3, the vast majority of the items are accounts of Tubman's life authored by others.

I suspect that, like my undergraduates, general readers will be hard-pressed to go beyond part 1, but here they will learn many interesting facts about Tubman. Readers will learn that Tubman's underground work spanned some ten years, and that Tubman sought not only to rescue slaves from the South but also sought opportunities to confront the institution of slavery more directly—by helping John Brown recruit guerillas in Canada and organizing popular resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act in New York. Readers might also be surprised to learn that Tubman was employed by the U.S. Army as a spy stationed at Hilton Head, South Carolina, where she helped train and educate freedwomen and men and lead black soldiers on a river raid on a Confederate army post. Indeed, the collective ignorance about Tubman's service to the country during the Civil War began when the army denied Tubman a soldier's pension. That it took twenty-eight years for Tubman to receive compensation from the government—and then, significantly, as a widow, *not* as a soldier—serves as a measure of post-emancipation racism, when black men were systematically denied political rights, segregation became the norm, and Tubman biographers defended "Harriet's simplicity and ignorance" against the manipulations of "the idle, miserable darkies who have swarmed about Washington and other cities since the War" (Samuel Hopkins and Sarah Bradford quoted in Humez, 168, 165). It is no wonder that much of Tubman's story was lost by postwar biographers intent on telling it.

In the remaining sections of the book, Humez does for Tubman what Nel Painter did for Sojourner Truth and Jean Yellin for Harriet Jacobs—she reveals authorial biases, corrects half-truths, animates silences, and, in the end, describes the process by which she has sought to tell the story as Tubman would have wanted. These sections form the bulk of *Harriet Tubman* and will be useful primarily for engaging graduate students in discussions about the challenges of writing histories of subjects for whom silence was an effective defense against racism and for whom dissemblance was the logical response to violence.

Villanova University

JUDITH ANN GIESBERG

*Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808–1915.* By MITCH KACHUN. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003. xi, 389p. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95.)

Historical memory has been a hot topic in recent years. This fine book on a century of African American emancipation celebrations comes from a student of Michael Kammen, one of the trail blazers of this subfield. Mitch Kachun deftly dissects how a minority group remembered its own history through festive gatherings when the majority group forgot, disparaged, or neglected it. It is a book that comports well with Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), where the Haitian historian-philosopher reminds us that "lived inequalities yield unequal historical power."

Kachun's major and minor theses are unexceptionable. The major theme is that from the official end of the slave trade in 1808 to the fiftieth anniversary of emancipation in the United States in 1915, African Americans commemorated the cardinal steps toward freedom in order to construct a usable past. The minor theme is that many white Americans opposed this memory-creating project and that it also caused division among black leaders and within black communities.

Organizing the freedom festivals and writing the sermons, speeches, and newspaper screeds that held the freedom message aloft was a key element of free black striving for an equal place in a white-dominated American society. It makes for fascinating reading to see how the freedom-commemorating public parades and attendant festivities changed in distinct phases as the nineteenth century wore on. In the first phase, big-city celebrations were pegged to the end of the slave trade on January 1, 1808, an appropriate day of thanksgiving made all the more necessary by the need to find an alternative July Fourth after white ruffians began to drive black celebrants from public commemorations of the Declaration of Independence. Kachun argues persuasively that by the late 1820s, these celebrations had lost their emotive power because the illegal Atlantic slave trade continued and a legal internal slave trade was heaping misery on a fast-growing population of slaves.

In the continued search for a usable past, African American leaders in the 1830s needed new historical turning points whose commemoration would serve the abolitionist cause. Coincident with launching the first black newspapers, creating black schools, and embarking on intercity cooperation, they gradually began to celebrate August 1, emancipation day in the British West Indies slave colonies in 1834. It is telling that Haitian independence and the creation of the hemisphere's first black republic on January 1, 1804, could *not* serve as a day of jubilee. Kachun is certainly correct that black leaders knew that celebrating a massive, successful black revolt in Haiti (which had already inspired slave revolts in the United States) would trigger wholesale violence against black celebrants.



So slavery's abolition in the British Caribbean would have to do for the antebellum era. As Kachun expertly explains, this brought white and black abolitionists together for celebrations in places large and small, ranging far west from the seaboard and northward into Canada. But such memory-maintenance projects also divided the black community because the fervor and indecorum of black masses gathering to celebrate West Indian emancipation in their own ways worried black leaders intent on fixing black respectability in the minds of hostile white people.

Not surprisingly, post-Civil War freedom festivals celebrated emancipation and black male enfranchisement. For the first time, such festivals spread into the South. Kachun's dissection of late nineteenth-century identity-fixing celebrations, with a special focus on Washington, DC, provides a telling story of how Freedom Day festivities eroded sharply by the early twentieth century. White withdrawal from what had usually been biracial gatherings partly accounts for this erosion, but also, in the Progressive Era, many black leaders, especially churchmen, rejected street parades as frivolous, wasteful magnets for white hostility. If historical memory was to survive, it would have to be through more elite-managed institutions such as black historical and literary societies, journals of black history, and black-produced histories of the African American people.

*University of California, Los Angeles*

GARY B. NASH

*The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh.* Edited by LAURENCE A. GLASCO. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004. vii, 422p. Appendices, maps, bibliography, index. \$39.95.)

Pittsburgh has always been in the shadow of Philadelphia in receiving attention from Pennsylvania historians. The publication of *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh* suggests that historians are aware that Pennsylvania history is much more than Philadelphia history. *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh*, written between 1938 and 1941, deserves attention chiefly because it was the first attempt to compile a survey history of Pittsburgh's African American community. People still remember the WPA American Series guides of states and cities but few realize that the agency also produced studies of racial and ethnic minorities. Some studies such as *The Negro in Virginia* (1940) and *The Florida Negro* (1993) were published, but most remained unpublished, including the studies on Pittsburgh and on Philadelphia.

*The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh* documents African Americans in Pittsburgh from the days when General Braddock came to Fort Duquesne with "a number of Negro wagoners and drivers" (p. 35) up to 1940. Laurence Glasco, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh and writer of many essays on

black Pittsburgh history, is the ideal editor for this volume. Glasco says nine African American and two white researchers worked on the WPA Pittsburgh study. This writing team had advantages and disadvantages. The advantages were that African Americans contributed to the project and that all the writers were familiar with Pittsburgh. Being social workers, probation officers, and Urban League workers rather than professional writers, however, they lacked training in historical research. But the writers worked under the supervision of former University of Pittsburgh history professor J. Ernest Wright. When the WPA ended in 1939, Wright's group had not finished its work. Glasco explains that "the frontier and antebellum periods are more thoroughly researched and documented than the Post-Civil War era. Because the chapter on politics is missing, we lack . . . a good understanding of the political evolution of black Pittsburghers" (p. 12).

Glasco has edited this problematic seven-hundred-page manuscript into a valuable book on Pennsylvania black history, containing much information not available elsewhere. Chapter 4, "Abolition Years," is one of the book's longest chapters and one of the best written. Other chapters are gems too, notably chapter 12, "Folkways," chapter 13, "Arts and Culture," and the final chapter, "The People Speak," which features oral histories. Maps, appendix documents, bibliography, and index make the book accessible to readers, especially those not familiar with Pittsburgh. The general public will enjoy this book, but as Glasco admits, "the lack of footnotes and proper citations reduces the [book's] value to scholars" (p. 11). Undoubtedly true to a point, the book cannot be used as a textbook but it can supplement primary sources. *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh* may well find lasting value as a model for a future definitive and comprehensive history of African Americans in Pittsburgh.

*The State Museum of Pennsylvania*

ERIC LEDELL SMITH